

A n A r c h i t e c t u r a l M e d i u m A D V E R T I S I N G

Les valeurs mercantiles, promues par les grandes corporations, dominent aujourd' hui le discours éthique dans notre société. La publicité, instrument par excellence du mercantilisme, tend à absorber au son sein, l'ensemble des activités humaines, l'architecture y compris. L'architecte doit, s'il veut échapper à cet empire, réinterpréter le rôle et les instruments de son travail.

It would be difficult to deny that the current practice of architecture has evolved to a point where the act of designing and building are two entirely different entities. This separation has allowed the architect to create a building based on a two dimensional representation and has ultimately led to the disembodiment of the experience from the act of building. The two dimensional methods of representation used to design and construct buildings have allowed many peripheral factors to influence the physical manifestation of drawing. One of the most overpowering influences is architecture's indoctrination by advertising: image-making which conveys messages without necessarily containing any real meaning.

The recognition of design as a separate activity from building in sixteenth-century Europe constituted a distinct split in the conceptual part of work from the labour process. The term design implied that designing was to be separate from doing.¹ The development of descriptive geometry and the formal rules of perspective drawing revolutionized the way in which a building could be represented in drawing. Orthogonal projections eventually came to represent the built reality of a building as opposed to the idea of the building. In subsequent centuries, a methodology of design was developed, to the point where design could be reduced to a process whereby calculation and prediction, the quantitative, could overrule the intuitive, experiential, qualitative factors.² This practice was reinforced by the development of scientific methodology in the nineteenth century and can be seen as a natural progression from the Greek ideology of reason. In the current practice of architecture, the design of a building is, more often than not, generated based on quantifiable factors and is developed through two dimensional media, precluding direct experience, knowledge of construction and consideration of the environment.

Not only have architects' methods of building and design changed, but their goals and values have deviated. At the turn of the century, the primary agenda and one of the main commitments of architects was to develop housing for a growing

working middle class and to readapt the structure of cities for the increasing predominance of technology in every-day life. Architects had to overturn a norm which had existed for centuries in that they were now applying their skills to the plebian population and not to the elite upper class. The forerunners of Modern architecture were critical of society, went against the grain and set new standards. There existed a desire to merge a utopian vision with the material object. Architects fought against the established ideology and asserted a critical built form which reflected some social responsibility. It seems today's architect has chosen to ignore the problems and discomforts of society, has ignored social commitment altogether; today's architect has been absorbed by the consumerist ideology of late capitalism. Whereas in the past architecture was based on religion, social needs, or technology, today it is based on advertising. The world of signs and symbols which is the essence of advertising is informing the architect. Within the social structure, advertising has stepped in and, through sheer omnipresence, now informs all other disciplines. "Even the endless grid of the city cannot compare with the astonishing density of the advertising environment. Experience is no longer fabricated from the catalogue of geometry; it is fashioned from the archive of advertising. All messages, all meanings have been invaded by advertising, all realities verge on the stereotypical."³

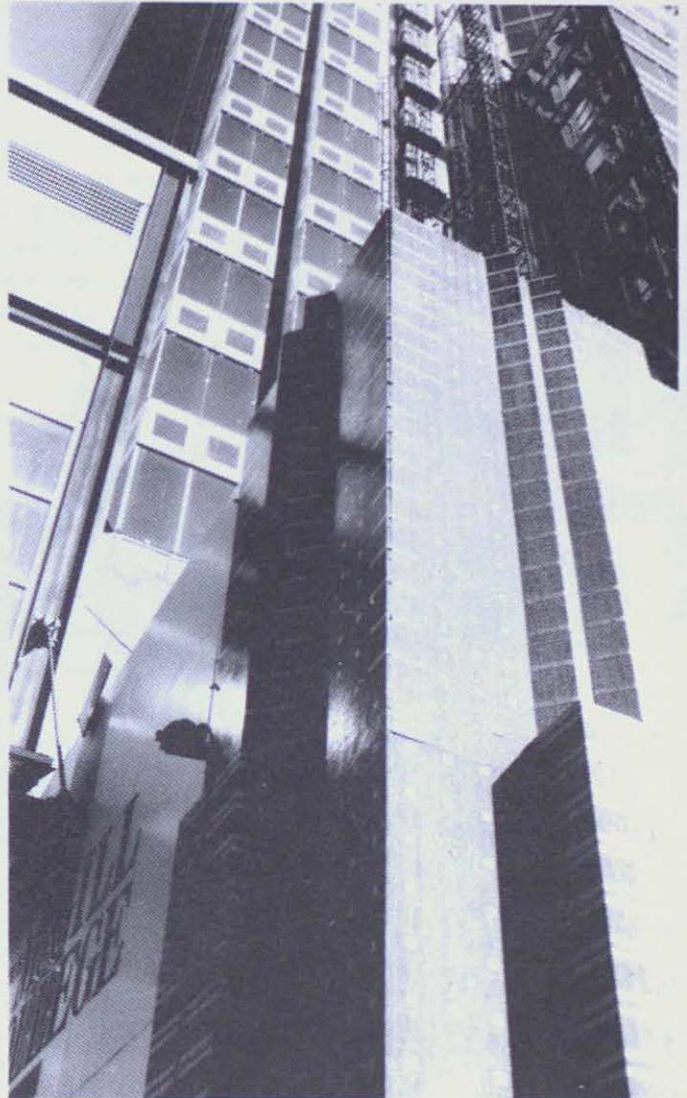
The ideals of our time are clearly based on the production/consumption model of economy. Through the complex workings of the concepts of ideology and the inter-relationship among different practices and institutions there emerges a predominant ideal: money equals success and status; money is power; power is the ultimate fulfilment of one's time on earth; the more a person has material worth, the more he is a worthwhile person; survival of the richest. Since architects, in large part, have adopted the same ideals as all other media, their agenda is the same: profit. Hence, today's architecture, now part of the dominating ideology, expresses the ultimate power structure, the corporation, in its image. "... architecture has devised the entire urban environment as a rhetorical expression of

the economic and political system. Building and "public space" join to communicate the grandeur and permanence of the corporation, its city and its nation...."⁴

The most effective way to convey constructed meanings of money and power is through marketing and advertising. Buildings are erected and sold based on the prestige and glamour that are associated with them, not because of the quality of design, workmanship or materials used, but because of the market value due to location and prominence (usually translated into height) of the building. These features are then propounded on large bill boards and advertisements which describe the prestige the tenant achieves by occupying the building. Thus the intention of the building, despite its function or actual attributes, is to advertise. Jean Baudrillard takes these ideas to their ultimate limit:

The body stage, the landscape as a stage, and time as a stage are slowly disappearing. The same holds true for the public space: the theatre of the social and of politics are progressively being reduced to a shapeless, multi-headed body. Advertising in its new version is no longer the baroque, utopian scenario ecstatic over objects and consumption, but rather the effect of the omnipresent visibility of corporations, trade marks, PR men, social dialogue and the virtues of communication. With the disappearance of the public place, advertising invades everything (the street, the monument, the market, the stage, language). It determines architecture and the creation of super-objects such as Beaubourg, Les Halles or La Villette which are literally advertising monuments...not so much because they are centered on consumption, but because from the outset these monuments were meant to be a demonstration of the operation of culture, of the cultural operation of the commodity and that of the masses in movement.⁵

This phenomenon can be clearly understood simply by observing our immediate urban environment: large glass buildings (sometimes pink) communicate nothing to the user/observer other than the power of the corporation to erect monumental structures; bigger buildings imply more money, which in turn imply power and success. These buildings usually have no architectural merit in themselves. They rarely contribute to innovation in design, materials or construction and exhibit no real quality. In fact, most effort is applied simply to the surface of the building since it is the facade which has the power to convey the desired image. In this way, architecture has bought into the system of signs; the building is an advertisement; it follows the norm and convention, challenges no one and conveys well-constructed images of success and power while having no real worth. In so doing, it completely loses touch with the ideal of creating liveable places for people and does not take into consideration the lived experience. These buildings in no way contribute to the structure or experience of our cities. In fact they detract from the urban fabric by becoming gigantic blank faces gazing at disengaged passers-by. "Architecture strives to



duplicate the construction of sign and object in advertising, borrowing the processes of "advertising-effect". Post-modern eclecticism and pastiche apply interruption to history; the buildings themselves intrude upon urban life, demanding our adaptation. Glamorous signs adorn the surfaces of buildings; high-tech materials and fantastic arcades transform the building into a fantasy of simulation...."⁶

Thus, the separation of the subject and the object, the image from the built reality have greatly facilitated advertising to set current architecture's standards and become its source. One of the results of this mentality is that social responsibility, as well as architectural responsibility, have not been neglected. As a result, architecture supports the corporation, which is at the root of advertising and the effect on the built environment is detrimental. "... Authors are brought to concede the superfluity of architectural



design in a society that is exclusively motivated by ruthless economic drives; a society which has nothing of greater significance to represent than the giant neon-lit sky sign of the average strip."⁷ Hence, the product of all the aforementioned factors is an architecture which has no goal other than to convey an image, to support the signs and symbols of the infrastructure: "...if there is a general principle that can be said to characterise Post-Modern architecture, it is the conscious ruination of style and the cannibalization of architectural form, as though no value either traditional or otherwise can withstand for long the tendency of the production/consumption cycle to reduce every civic institution to some kind of consumerism ... the imperatives of "monopolized" economy are such as to reduce the practice of architecture to large-scale packaging...."⁸

The use of Computer Aided Design further reinforces the perception of architecture as a manifestation of an image apart

from and ignoring the lived experience, as a practice related to technology and mass production for the attainment of profit, as well as a process which is integrally linked to the present communications network. The CAD system allows the designer to input a building or object which is defined by a three dimensional co-ordinate system into a data structure. The result is an image of a realistic representation of the building as it would supposedly look once it was constructed. The danger, as in all sign systems, is that the reality of the image and the reality of the built form are two distinct entities which are not made readily distinguishable. An illusion of reality is the key reason for this software's success (as previously discussed, success equals profit). Mike Cooley relates an interesting anecdote concerning the uses of the computer: "...the spectrum of problems associated with them (computer techniques) are already becoming manifest, including the spectacular separation of theory and practice whereby some of those who have been weaned on CAD are unable to recognize the object they have designed."⁹

The huge dilemma for architecture which does not exist in advertising is that the images created by the computer will eventually represent a built reality. The built environment will directly reflect any shortcomings of the design. However, the seduction of the image, and the idea behind the image are considered paramount. The experience and the reality of the building are an afterthought in the minds of a majority of today's designers, and this attitude is clearly visible throughout the city. Kenneth Frampton raises the issue of the aesthetic results of this process: "...High-speed photographic and reproductive processes are surely not only the political economy of the sign but also an insidious filter through which our tactile environment tends to lose its concrete responsiveness. When much of modern building is experienced in actuality, its photogenic quality is denied by the poverty and brutality of its detailing...."¹⁰

Thus, the experience of the built form is removed further from the realm of reality through a system which simulates a non-existent object. The fact that CAD is becoming a wide-spread tool and is being used uncritically to generate buildings further illustrates the superficiality with which architects are approaching design. Baudrillard expresses these ideas with a brutal clarity: "...Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin in reality: a hyperreal...Perhaps only the allegory of the Empire remains. For it is with the same imperialism that present-day simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models...The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks, and command models - and with these it can be reproduced an

infinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all...."¹¹

It seems that if architecture continues on its current course, it will cease to have any significance or relevance in society. It seems architects are contributing to their future extinction since many members of society view them as purveyors of a built form which not only contributes nothing to the environment but which, in some cases, is actually detrimental to our lived experience. As was discussed, there are many factors which have contributed to this evolution of architecture, namely the schism of the building from experience and of the adoption of profit as a main agenda. The latter factor is a direct result of embracing the ideologies of our time.

Future architects must reverse these trends by reinstating the importance of the embodied experience of the building. The tactile and sensory dimensions, which have been so grossly overlooked, must figure prominently in the minds of designers. For the tactile can only be decoded through experience itself; it cannot be reduced to information, to a code, or to a sign; it cannot be simulated.

Not many people are pleased with the state of our built environment. A change must occur. Architects are vested with the power to create a physical reality and to contribute to the built environment. For urban areas to become pleasing places, experientially and psychologically, architects must re-evaluate their ideological standpoints: are we critical observers and builders or are we cogs in the wheel of the current ideology, where money is the ultimate goal and all efforts serve to reinforce the supremacy of the corporation?

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Notes:

1. Mike Cooley, "From Brunelleschi to CAD-CAM", *Design After Modernism*, Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 198.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
3. Richard Bolton, "Architecture and Cognac", *Design After Modernism*, Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 88.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
5. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. L'autre par lui-meme, Semiotexte, 1988, p. 20.
6. Richard Bolton, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
7. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, 1980, p. 291.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 307.
9. Mike Cooley, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
10. Kenneth Frampton, *op. cit.*, p. 312.
11. Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra", *Art After Modernism*, Halliday Lithograph Corp., 1984, pp. 253-254.

