The Tyranny of the New
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Since the early days of modernism, progressive architects and critics have lamented the backwardness of their discipline - particularly in relation to the design of industrially produced objects. Within the rhetoric of positivism a certain obsession with the new would be understandable. However, even in the Twenties and Thirties, at the height of revolutionary modernist zeal, architects were confronted by the cultural foundation of their endeavour. Whether it was Le Corbusier formulating his five points as a critique of the classical canon, or the architects of the Weimer Republic addressing the conditions of settlement and inhabitation, architects have always found it difficult to remain on the narrow path of determinism.

At the end of the 20th century, with late capitalism accepted as the predominant economic, the ideology of newness has become transparently associated with the workings of the market. Now, more than ever, it is its cultural history that lends architecture continued relevance. It is architecture's capacity to be reflexive and critical that sets it apart from advertising, on the one hand, and pure science on the other.

At a recent lecture at the Architectural Association the relative stasis of architectural form was uncharitably compared to that of telephones and cars. Despite common perceptions, formal progress is largely independent of technical developments. For example, the operation of the telephone has hardly changed since its invention. What is significant in the development of communication technology is not whether a phone looks like Mickey Mouse or an American football, but rather the capacity, complexity and speed of the networks that can be accessed by the device. Similarly, the Porsche 356 that was produced immediately after the Second World War bears a close resemblance to the new Boxster and looks more 'contemporary' than the angular sports car bodies of the Seventies.

In the global free market economy, stasis is never good enough. As genuine demand within existing markets become satiated, increasingly contrived desires need to be created and than satisfied by multinational companies desperate to increase their market share. Within this schema design plays an ever more important role. As substantial progress becomes increasingly difficult to achieve formal novelty becomes a new focus. Was the invention of alcopops really progress? What advantages does one gain from Word 98 that were not available in earlier versions used in conjunction with QuarkXPress, other than those resulting from the more powerful platform that is required to run it?

A part of the architectural profession has always been in the service of the economic hegemony. In the same way that post-David Carson grunge typography has replaced the neo-conservative Baskerville of Eighties corporate advertising, neo-modernism is the new post-modern classicism of the Nineties, being built for the same developer clients and in many cases by the same architects. What has changed is the theoretical legitimisation that this form of practice has received from a number of leading practitioners and academics. They state that architecture is being increasingly marginalised and can no longer hold on to dreams of an ethical imperative. Contemporary architects ate not in a position to judge the situation of their practice and if the discipline is to continue to have any relevance it must harness the immense forces of today's economic and infrastructural systems. Connected to this new quasi-functionalist basis for architecture is a faith in the power of new descriptive tools to order and transform the raw data of society's underlying systems into completely new forms of architecture. The relative ease of manipulating complex surfaces on computer means that non-Cartesian space and bifurcated-plate plan organisations become redolent of the new architecture.

Recent interest in airports, shopping malls and infrastructures emerges from an idea that it is these places where the processes of the contemporary economy are most brutally apparent. Paradoxically, it is precisely these typologies that have the least use for architecture. As the development of the North American shopping mall over the last 40 years convincingly shows, it is the requirements of the market

that are always primary. Traditionally this meant substantial department stores or supermarkets at each extremity of the mall, double loaded circulation routes of precisely the correct width and ample parking. As the market for shops has become saturated, in addition to food courts, multiplexes and amusement rides, the look of the mall has been seized upon as a potential attraction. For architects to engage in these programmes is for architecture to become a commodified product and to be subject to the tyranny of the new. However, the processes of the market are by no means rational or immutable. The hysteria that characterises the creation of new markets and the behaviour of existing ones cannot be financially sustainable, and more seriously, are not environmentally sustainable.

Rather than adopt an opportunistic position with regard to our contemporary condition, architecture can provide a critical bulwark to the status quo. There is no compelling evidence as to why architecture should reject more than 400 years of working within a liberal arts context, nor is there compelling evidence that architecture is any more marginal than at other times over that period. Has the percentage of total construction involving architects ever been higher than 1 percent? As art practice has done for the last 50 years, architecture can put forward ameliorative strategies and paradigms that might suggest what could come after the global market and can remind us of the things that are excluded within the current social model.

Architecture is by definition about stasis. It is about making material inventions of a finite size in specific situations. In the best cases an architectural intervention has a critical relationship with its situation and its construction is somehow communicative with the existing physical and social context. Even in the most banal buildings, however, physical place is the framework against which inhabitation is enacted. In a house it is the location of domestic culture. Within the public realm, it is the physical territory of collective action. Because the architectural project is necessarily located, it inevitably, whether intentionally or not, engages with existing patterns of inhabitation. In the same way as in art and literature, but in a less easily ignored way, architecture contributes to our collective memory. Because of the impossibility of a tabula rasa condition, constructions keep us honest. They remind us of things that we do not necessarily want to remember.

It is remarkable how little technology has effected the development of architectural form. The vast majority of buildings still betray a trabeated tectonic, despite the best efforts of architects. Monocoque and other self-similar structural systems, while widely used in aeroplane and boat construction, are difficult to legitimise in building construction. The longevity of trabeation is not simply because it is relatively easy to build regular plan forms with rectilinear material units, but because the image of the column and beam, of figural windows, of masonry units all are part of an ongoing constructional discourse. Claims for completely new forms are tautological. Not only is it doubtful whether completely new forms can exist, but the imperative to make forms that have no connection to the past and are the harbinger of an enhanced future is anti-critical and conservative. The condition of perpetual novelty within a void-like tabula rasa, like an empty screen with the promise of networks of simultaneous virtual realities, undermines cultural continuity and denies the location of collective action. A more radical formal strategy is one that considers and represents the existing and the known. In this way artistic production can critically engage with an existing situation and contribute to an ongoing and progressive cultural discourse.