Strangers in the city

Philosophy of Architecture/Architecture of Philosophy

Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History (CATH) Congress, National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, Bradford, 9–11 July 2004

The National Museum of Photography, Film and Television – now the most visited museum in the UK outside of London – has, on its own terms, clearly been something of a success. Yet if the location of the museum in Bradford was intended to contribute to the economic regeneration of the city – which recently made a failed bid to become a European Capital of Culture – indications are that it has failed to do so in any significant way. The ubiquitous Will Alsop, fresh from the cancellation of his would-be iconic Fourth Grace project in Liverpool, has apparently drawn up a 'visionary study' of the city, but there is as yet little evidence of any new exercises in urban planning being set in motion to transform the city and its infrastructure. The various buildings dotted around the city centre, many examples of an aggressive style of 1960s municipal brutalism, almost without exception display signs offering space to rent.

Given the oft-remarked, if inconsistent, role that architectural design has played in recent projects of urban 'redevelopment' and in the attraction of investment capital to former industrial centres – the 'Bilbao effect' – one would have hoped that a conference on architecture and philosophy, at such a museum and in such a city, might have sought to address the complex issues involved. Sadly, with one or two valuable exceptions among the 140-odd speakers from around the globe, this was not to be.

The conference's opening plenary paper was given by one of the few professional philosophers present, Andrew Benjamin, who chose as his topic, not favoured contemporary architects like Eisenman or Libeskind, but Kasimir Malevich and the 'potential of the line'. As usual, and despite the fact that its relevance to architectural questions wasn't always evident, this subject was discussed with undeniable philosophical sophistication. Benjamin displayed a Derridean facility for the detailed unravelling of singular lines of deconstructive possibility in both Malevich's written and his visual works. Equally typically, however, the paper threatened a theoretically ambiguous formalism by virtue of a certain evasiveness with regard to the historical conditions of Malevich's practice. The question of whether any account of an architectural work's 'potentiality' can claim to be adequate without a more explicit recognition of the work's inextricable relations to social and political reality remained, at the end of Benjamin's paper (as of so many others given here), an all-too-obvious concern.

A similar problem emerged in the paper by Jeffrey Kipnis on the second day, which began by recalling his role in the Derrida–Eisenman collaboration during the 1980s. Kipnis's articulation of 'architecture' as a historically self-conscious attempt to

speculate intellectually in building seemed to have considerable potential, as did what might be generously described as his call for a new theory of decoration in architecture. Yet this was immediately undermined by a lazy image-driven presentation and a set of intellectual speculations on the category of the 'same' that unfortunately suggested that he hadn't grasped the distinctive philosophical claims of Derrida's work all that well in the first place.

The Friday-night plenary session was held in the remarkable wood-panelled council chamber of Bradford City Hall. Dana Arnold's presentation appeared to be culled from undergraduate lecture notes – with revelations such as 'history isn't neutral' – but Andrew Ballantyne did at least address the issues involved in the kind of architecture of power of which the council chamber was representative, and the social and political forces that made it possible.

What was going on elsewhere, among the paying participants in the various parallel 'open sessions', was of variable quality. Part of the problem was the sheer vastness of the material that the conference topic could encompass. This was not helped by the appallingly vague call for papers originally sent out by CATH, with its seven different strands. As a result, no consistent field of debate or argument was able to evolve across the three days. Indeed, it quickly became apparent that this was essentially a general 'catch-all' architectural theory and history conference. Beatriz Colomina, the final plenary speaker, offered a brilliant reading of the Smithsons' *House of the Future* as a Cold War architecture of fear and paranoia, thought-provoking and exhaustively researched, but its relation to the theme was at best opaque.

The conference ended with a somewhat disappointed acknowledgement by Griselda Pollock, CATH's director, that 'the philosophers' hadn't really 'turned up', and the hope that they might attend similar events in the future. However, in this instance, one might come to regret what one wished for. The sessions on Heidegger and 'dwelling', for example, were among the poorest, with many apparently convinced that the latter term simply referred to the conditions of a 'place' that was pleasant enough to hang around in. The arguments underlying the Heideggerian articulation of the *impossibility* of dwelling within modernity were barely acknowledged in the rush to construct an essentially reactionary philosophy of architecture of a type that would make certain philosophers themselves feel at home. The lasting impression was that, despite the admirable ambition to promote a 'transdisciplinary encounter', architecture and philosophy remained as much strangers to each other as before.

Yet there are good reasons for imagining that a genuine counter-disciplinary overlap between philosophy and 'architectural knowledge' may, at this historical juncture, hold a key to certain problems central to what, in the last issue of *Radical Philosophy*, Peter Osborne described as a transdisciplinary account of an emergent global capitalist modernity. Such an account involves a conceptual articulation of the new logics of urbanization and the material conditions of the space of flows which govern the dominant spatial practices of the contemporary. The possibilities of something like this could be glimpsed in some of the better open sessions, such as the panel on 'architectural gestures in allegorical media' organized by James Tobias of the University of California, which sought to think through the architectural consequences of the 'embedding' of the 'virtual' within the 'actual', and the philosophical resources that might allow us to mediate the distinctive modes of abstraction that this entails. Redirecting Tafuri's critical project, David Soloman's fascinating paper on the Twin Towers, as simultaneously 'a failed architectural object and a very usable image', sought to analyse how the skyscraper mediates processes of technical innovation and processes of publicity, revealing, in its symbolic 'giganticism', the irrationality at the heart of capitalist modes of rationalization. Tobias's own paper effectively placed Lewis Carroll's fascination with 'logical play' alongside Schiller's concept of aesthetic education in order to discuss the means by which subjects are produced for an 'informatic' global environment through certain processes of 'interface' learning, and the role that architecture may play in this, in its relations to other cultural forms. Here, at least, one got a glimpse of what a transdisciplinary encounter might deliver, as a 'dialectic of creative and political thinking'. It threw into stark relief how exceptional this was.

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