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Notes on “Architecture and Disjunction”

This book by Bernard Tschumi is actually a collection of essays written between 1975 and 1991. They are grouped into three categories whose titles are extremely graphic: Space, Program and Disjunction.

Some of the topics this presentation will be dealing with differ in some ways from those previously discussed in class, while others might be stemmed from or related to them. The inevitable interest in widening the way we are approaching architecture will remain as the driving thread of all those issues.

In order to do so, two essays have been deemed the most adequate. Curiously, the first and the last one, namely, “The Architectural Paradox” (September 1975) and “Six concepts” (February 1991).

The former seeks to ultimately reflect a personal view on the struggle between the possible interactions between human perception and space.

On the one hand, what it is cited as “The Pyramid” is derived from the way in which sciences such as philosophy, mathematics and physics have attempted throughout history to “state the precise nature of space”. After chronologically examining a number of intriguing views on the topic (i.e. the dematerialization of space into the realm of concepts, or the view of architecture as an autonomous play of language), Tschumi, striving to come up with an architecture – oriented sort of definition, eventually claims that the essence of space is mental, and that it is the architect who provides the “ultimate model of reason” (the pyramid) by which the conception of a building comes to being. This way, “Architecture is a cosa mentale and the forms conceived by the architect ensure the domination of the idea over the matter”.

Secondly, the so called “Labyrinth” alludes to the physical, sensory experience of space. What is first? Is it the fact of your eyes receiving partial information of the place you are in? Or is it an operation of reason involved that allows you to construct an overall idea of the space even though you only perceive glimpses of it? How these two processes interact? How do they take place in time? In contrast with the “pyramid of reason” that operates from the total, Tschumi highlights in this case the lack of general perspective, just as “a labyrinth where all sensations, all feelings are enhanced, but where no overview is present to provide a clue about how to get out”.

So the paradox mainly lies on “the impossibility of questioning the nature of space and at the same time making or experiencing a real space”. Yet the subject is eventually given a greater importance, when it is stated that “the sensual architecture reality is not experienced as an abstract object already transformed by consciousness but as an immediate and concrete human activity”. This idea of immediacy that comes up by the end of the text is definitely an exciting one. Along with the very process of reflection, they both arouse much more interest than the conclusion, being this the solution of the paradox presented as a “blending of the architecture rule and the experience of pleasure”.

The second essay, “Six concepts”, which was in fact a lecture given at Columbia University, appears to be a statement of intent. It might be said that deals primarily with the question of image in all its manifestations and readings. Just as an acupuncture operation, some questions have been extracted from the text and confronted with the reality that the architecture discourse in general (and the scenario in Dubai in particular) is going through today. It is precisely their surprisingly current validity what challenges the actual contributions that architecture has been able to deliver during the last seventeen years...

**REACTION** – “Much of architectural postmodernism was developed at a time of general reaction against what we perceived as the abstraction of modernism: abstraction because modernism’s glass office buildings were “imageless” and cold like abstract paintings” So what is our reaction against what we see today, this unclassifiable proliferation of different languages amongst which even the attempt of standing out through simplicity has been brought into play?

**SUPERFICIALITY** – “(...) they all referred to a very narrow sector of architectural culture: they dealt only with the appearance of architecture (...)” Is it not the way much contemporary architecture tends to be produced? Could be think the story of our projects to be told in several possible ways rather than being tied to a single sequence that can only go through image? Could we then pursue a certain degree of completeness?

**PERCEPTION** – “(...) what we might call reality is such that a single, objective reality is increasingly difficult to conceive. (...) Inevitably, architecture and its perception will become like another object of contemporary reality.” This is the input the studio is meant to provide the playground to research. How do we work with architecture and perception when thinking of a physical construction? How do we integrate them into the kind of “reality” we are currently experience? How do they affect and interact with the rest of parameters that are intended to constitute the body of architectural and urban projects?
LANGUAGE – “(...) all of them coexist and increasingly provoke in us a profound indifference: indifference to difference.” This is again the same perception we have today, one generation later. Has that moment to raise “what’s next” arrived yet? Does it make sense at all to try to think of a new language?

PURPOSE – “Indeed, if most of architecture has become surface, applied decoration, superficiality, paper architecture (...), what distinguishes architecture from other forms of billboard design: or, more ambitiously, what distinguishes architecture from editions, layouts, graphics? (...) how architecture remains a means by which society explores new territories, develops new knowledge?” (self – explanatory)

STRATEGY – “(...) one should take advantage of such dismantling, celebrate fragmentation by celebrating the culture of differences, by accelerating and intensifying the loss of certainty, of center, of history.” This has been already put in practice many times, as has been more recently the construction of the so called topographical and deterritorialized space. Again, what’s next? What others variables an operations could we involve in our approach to the architectural fact? How would they relate to core concepts such as space, geometry, program and representation?

TECHNOLOGY – “(...) to say that society is now about media and mediation makes us aware that the direction taken by technology is less the domination of nature through technology than the development of information and the construction of the world as a set of images. (...) in the words of Paul Virilio, we are not dealing anymore with the technology of construction, but with the construction of technology.” So that long ago, we were already thinking of “constructing the world as a set of images”. What is that next step which goes beyond the image? How do we want to construct the world? If, as commonly accepted today, technology no longer holds hands with spatial investigation, as it used to be ten years ago, yet it goes way further, how can we bridge that gap? How do we take technological change into consideration in our architectural projects not only by using the tools it provides, but also by addressing its effect on our lives and the way it alters our use of space?

ORNAMENT – “When metaphors and catachreses are turned into buildings, they generally turn into plywood or papier mache stage sets: the ornament again.” Are we using the metaphor as a means to research on other issues that may be relevant to our architectural projects or is it just related to representation? Is it an a priori or does it comes afterwards? What is the role of ornament in architecture today? Is it seen just as an attachment?

FORM/FUNCTION – “(...) the complete interchangeability of form and function, the loss of traditional, canonic cause – and – effect relationships as sanctified by modernism. Function does not follow form, form does not follow function – or fiction for that matter – however, they certainly interact.” What are then the implications between the two? In which direction should they affect each other? Should be head towards the production of infrastructures, rather than buildings? Would they not be more adequate to the pace many constructions change their programs and the characteristic spontaneity of the contemporary event? To what extent can we get rid of the specificity in architecture?

CROSSPROGRAMMING – “If architecture is both concept and experience, space and use, structure and superficial image – non - hierarchically – then architecture should cease to separate these categories and instead merge them into unprecedented combinations of programs and spaces.” Have we actually faced these issues often enough? Does it not still seem to be an unexplored field, especially if we refer to certain scales?

EVENT – “For Foucault, an event is not simply a logical sequence of words of actions but rather (...) the moment of erosion, collapse questioning, or problematization of the very assumptions of the setting within which a drama may take place – occasioning the chance or possibility of another, different setting. The event is seen here as a turning point.” Do our projects allow for these “turning points”? In other words, do they count on the right balance between specificity and indefiniteness? How do we spatialize that? What kind of topology does this demand?

REPRESENTATION – “I would like to associate it with the notion of shock, a shock that in order to be effective in our mediated culture, in our culture of images, must go beyond Walter Benjamin’s definition and combine the idea of function or action with that of image.” How does the image of our projects relate to their spatial organization? What is the “depth of influence” of the skins we imagine? Would it not be challenging to think of that depth as that of the whole building, therefore rendering the representational character and the space itself indistinguishable?

TRANSLATION – “I do not believe it is possible, nor does it make sense, to design buildings that formally attempt to blur traditional structures, that is, that display forms that lie somewhere between abstraction and figuration (...) Architecture is not an illustrative art; it does not illustrate theories.” Are we sometimes literally attempting to transfer concepts an ideas from other disciplines such as art or philosophy? How do we construct the filters between the source and the outcome? In this sense, how “reliable” is our process of producing architecture? How autonomous?

Contributions on any field are very welcome.