Architectural Form and The Subjugation of Concepts

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Mark Foster Gage

> *'Affect' is murky stuff, hard to define or grasp; its relationship to its wayward sibs, 'feeling' and 'emotion', is uncertain and variable.. From its earliest days, when Freud, in 1895, tried to theorize mental life in terms of parcels of psychic energy, affect has often been used to signal something quantitative and non-cognitive in the psyche."*
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> *- Lisa Baraitser, Affect and Encounter in Psychoanalysis*

It has been noted all too frequently in recent architectural discourse that the explosive innovation in computation and fabrication technologies in the past decade has enabled the production of a new species of complex architectural form, but that this form has been unable to find significant purchase as a social and cultural project. What this observation lacks is the ability to reconcile the forms of 'computational formalism' in visual terms, requiring that such projects are typically 'justified' only in terms of their physical performance, their genesis as the result of some presumably accurate strategy of mapping information into form, or, even more dismissively, their debasing through accusations of mere individual expressionism. While these proposed fictions are inevitably true in some circumstances, there is much more at stake for architectures association with the developing products of computational formalism in the philosophical discourses of the visual that allow these emerging architectural forms to be better understood as cultural products operating in a manner that is no longer contingent on linguistics or conceptual abstractions as translating tools for their cultural efficacy.

The cause, or perhaps result, of these formal innovations is architectures migration away from its historical roots in the common shapes of Euclidean geometry, and towards a discipline of more complex data-rich forms and networks of forms. Such forms have predictably capitalized on the progressive accuracy of "Moore's Law" which, to date, has outlined almost four decades worth of continuing advances in computation, and, as such, seems a reasonable predictor of futures innovations that will, without question, drive this architectural project further.[i] In this new post Euclidean architectural scenario the expected notions of Cartesian walls give way to laser cut gradated dermic skins, rooms give way to supple scripted figural organs,

structures give way to intricate skeletons with variable connections, and the tendrils of digital communication and media technology function as the umbilical through which these architectural forms convey new matter orchestrated towards the production of saturated atmospheric overlays.[ii] Stripped of its metaphorical limitations, Alberti's discourse of the body for architecture is both wholly renewed and ripe for extreme revision.

It is the formal complexity of these forms- whether singular, aggregated, rhythmic, pulsing, or networked, that are neither metaphorically bio-mimetic, nor conceived according to the historical constraints of Euclidean geometry, that requires a reconsidered relationship with the visual qualities of their physical existence. The basis of this retooling must begin with a brief but carefully reconsidered re-reading of Kant's discourse on aesthetic judgment, the foundation of any philosophical discussion on appearances, and in particular his associated discourse of "*subsuming under concepts*," or more commonly referred to as *subsumation*. Early in the first two moments of the *Critique of Judgment* Kant establishes the basis for aesthetic judgment as occurring as an act separate from the conceptual identification of the object being judged.[iii] For Kant, a vase is judged aesthetically, independent of the cognitive decision that recognizes the vase as "a vase," whereby it is assigned a known given label and function. The fact that the vase has a label, as a cultural construct, and has a determined function, in no way impacts the aesthetic judgment of the vase by the viewer, as aesthetic judgments are made independently from such conceptual judgments. That is not to say that the vase does not have a name or a function or that it can convey a meaning as a sign, symbol or index, but rather that the direct relationship between physical form itself, and recognition of its aesthetic qualities is independent from these intellectual abstractions, and possibly precedes them.[iv] The prerequisite that Kant identifies for this pictorial transaction between form and viewer is that the viewer must be disinterested in the object at hand, as desire for actual possession corrupts the act of aesthetic judgment.[v]

The nature of architecture vis-à-vis its scale and public nature makes its products highly resistant to the desire for actual possession in the same way that, for instance, a necklace may be desired. Only architecture at the

smallest of domestic scales flirts with the possibility of violating Kants prerequisite, and so disinterestedness ceases to be a significant component in the act of associated aesthetic judgments. Therefore, independent from and preceding the act of subsumation, where an object is intellectual abstracted into a concept and labeled accordingly, exists the act of aesthetic judgment based solely on the visual appearances of form. That is to say an objects aesthetic qualities, including but not limited to form, color, texture, reflectivity etc., invite aesthetic judgment prior to, and independent from, other cognitive and conceptual processes. It is this definition of the aesthetic judgment becomes of critical importance when put into dialogue with the non-geometrical and non-biomimetic forms of computationally derived architectural production.

This new genre of complex and largely precedent-free forms resists, and delays the very act of subsumation as there is no primitive geometry, function, or form to be recognized, labeled, or identified. Once the form is seen visually it cannot be cognitively connected to any meta-version of itself, as none exists. The indefinite delay of the act of subsumation infinitely expands the moment of aesthetic judgment and allows for a new depth regarding the pre-cognitive visual and pictorial characteristics of form. The aesthetic judgments of beauty or ugliness are no longer brief and fleeting, evaporating at Kant-cum-Fielders act of subsumation, but are instead prolonged into a new mental state into which architects may now physically and theoretically introduce new genres of cultural relevance. This prolonged aesthetic moment more extremely renovates Jeff Kipnis's apology for deconstruction which posits that "...deconstruction seeks to produce work in respect of undecidability, that is, work that, though not meaningless, does not simply give itself over to meaning."[vi] The difference being that a computationally derived complex architecture that capitalizes on the foreignness of such production entirely resists meaning in favor of a curious and idiosyncratic affect, existing without recourse to legitimization through being linked to an outside intellectual or conceptual construct.vii Instead of autonomous or relational meaning, quantifiable affect, as a descendant of Freuds ambition to describe in measure the energy of the psyche, and it's related emotional influence become the new offspring of these forms, as they operate directly on the

perceptual and sensational neural triggers that precede conscious thought. Instead of a top-down catholic interpretation of architectural meaning by a critical elite, architectural experience now exist as unfiltered reception through deep affect-- operating on the common hardwired emotional systems first identified by Charles Darwin within three years of Freud's own proto-affective speculations on the psyche.[viii] It may seem a late entry to architectural discourse that affect would emerge nearly century after Freud and Darwin's psychological and evolutionary foundations of the subject, but it's appearance is made obvious when one considers the exponential proliferation of formal and materials options recently made available to the profession of architecture. Such a dramatic change in the opportunities for formal production offers the first historical moment when architects have had access to forms, which by virtue of their sheer complexity and the professions ability to no manage such complexity, are not immediately subsumable under existing concepts of human experience.

Such techniques of pre-conceptual communication are surprisingly undernourished in the discipline of architecture, but are used towards great effect in nearly every other design discipline in the emerging 21st century. A mere glance at the power of affect-driven influence present in the cinema, automotive design, advertising, food packaging, or any number of tangentially related industries should be a source of sheer embarrassment for an architectural profession still rehearsing century-old scripts of political and tectonic efficacy. The impact of much of the work within these fields is not contingent on meaning or linguistic models of representation, instead it is the emotional sympathy, aesthetic enticement and ecstatic moments of pre-conceptual clarity that are perceived by the viewer. While affect in architecture is not as easily located as, say, the terrifying affect of a horror film-- the possibility that conceptual meaning is rejected, or at least preceded by a new model of influence should be an enticing possibility for an emerging generation of architects with not only access to new families of tools available for architectural design, but to the very tools used in these related industries themselves. What architecture now needs in this expanded world of visual literacy and non-conceptual legibility, is the production of new techniques, forms of influence, and subtleties of affect that negotiate

the new terrain between architectural form and its various forms of public and private reception.

The influences of affect produced through complex form are not reliant on cognitive interpretation, but are equally intelligent and more importantly, popularly accessible by a public pre-configured with the ability to experience such sensations without the intellectual training typically required to place architecture in a discourse of conceptual thought or reading. That is to say, an architecture of affect is inherently, in a perhaps unexpected new rehearsal of the political agenda of modernism, entirely democratic it its non-discriminatory cultural ambitions that seek to convey nuance and intelligence through non-conceptual models of sensory cognition. As such, the experience of understanding form through affect holds great promise. An understanding of architecture in the emerging 21st century is contingent on the visual and pictorial-- all linked to a human intelligence that is yet untainted by conventional linguistic and conceptual interpretations. The fallout from this is an architecture that defies intellectual and linguistic understanding, and exists instead as an affect-inducing, deep, and primally engaging aesthetic proposition-- one ripe with new forms of relevance, meaning, and cultural importance, all promising a continued importance for the ongoing discourse of form as fundamental to the discourse of architecture.

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i In the April 1965 issue of Electronics Magazine, Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel introduced what later became known as "Moores law," essentially, it is doubling of available transistors for computer processing every two years. This timing negotiates between the sustained development of technical advances and the desire, for marketing reasons, to slow and regulate dissemination of such advances to the public.

ii For further information on the transition from Euclidean geometries to those of topological and computational complexity see: Lynn, Greg. Animate Form. New York: Princeton Architectural, 1999.
For further information on the emergence of atmospheric overlays in the service of architectural interiority see: Lavin, Sylvia. "Kissing Architecture: Super Disciplinarity and Confounding Mediums." Ed. Mark Foster Gage and Florenica Pita. Log 17 (2010): 9-16.

iii See Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgment, trans. James Creed Meredith, First ed. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1952, 41-60.

iv For the addition of time into Kant's equation of subsumation, where the aesthetic judgment precedes the conceptual act of intellection, as opposed to being merely independent from it, see Fiedler, Conrad. On Judging Works of Visual Art. Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1949. 27-58.

v Op. Cit. iii, p. 50.

vi See Nolo Contendere. Jeffrey Kipnis, Assemblage, No. 11 (Apr., 1990), pp. 54-57

vii Peter Eisenman defines Affect for architecture as the following: "Affect is the conscious subjective aspect of an emotion considered apart from bodily changes. Affect in architecture is simply the sensate response to a physical environment." in Eisenman, Peter 'The Affects of Singularity', AD Theory & Experimentation: Architectural Ideas for Today and Tomorrow, Vol 62, No 11/12, Nov/Dec 1992

viii See by Charles Darwin's 1895 text "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals," the first text to definitively articulate the commonalities of human emotion as products of evolution rather than circumstance.