Log

FALL 2009
Observations on
architecture and the
contemporary city

45° 29' N, 73° 34' W
1920 Rue Baile, Montreal, Quebec
At the Canadian Centre for Architecture, a study center and museum in Montreal, collecting "artifacts" entails more than the acquisition of individual photographs, prints, and drawings; it includes archiving whole projects and even commissioning new work. Commissioned photographers have documented America's courthouses, depicted the contemporary condition of parks and gardens designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, and, most recently, responded to images in the collection itself. Entire archived projects or careers of architects whose work represents a singular contribution to the discipline illustrate the center's mandate to "collect material that reflects the development of ideas in architecture." To look through the lens of Lee Friedlander to see anew the work of Olmsted or to study a sketch by Cedric Price to imagine his fantastical Fun Palace is also to open oneself to a certain tradition of radical thinking that moves architecture and the designed environment toward a rewarding future.

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$15.00

Mark Foster Gage

In Defense of Design

You can't judge an apple by looking at a tree / You can't judge honey by looking at the bee . . . – *Bo Diddley*

People who don't know anything tend to make up fake rules, the real rules being considerably more difficult to learn. – *Aaron Sorkin*

Sometimes a line is just a line. A pickup line, for instance, is content to be just a line – without knowing a larger paragraph, or even a sentence. A one-liner is a self-contained unit of linguistic charisma, slightly more freestanding than a punch line, which wants at least a setup. All of these are smaller than the more inclusive but equally self-contained party or chorus line, which is a little closer to the herd mentality of cabals of architectural thought. Architecture, of course, really has a more graphic lineup, where a line can be just a line, drawn not *to* something but *as* something, not as part of a network or a map but as a willful act of design. Such a line defines the history of drawing, if not of architecture, regardless of the party line of the day.

But these have been difficult times for such willful architectural lines. No longer is it sufficient to be a mere line – now a line must have a story, a reason, an alibi for its straight-laced life. A line is no longer allowed to be a thing but must now connect things – things larger and more important than itself. The architectural line is now defensible only if it is the direct result of an act of analysis, of a process, a mapping exercise, or just about any manipulation of data emerging from any body of factors. This contemporary emphasis on process and analysis is largely the product of a drift in architectural theory from linguistic and poststructural models to what David Gissen, in his *Log* 12 article "Architecture's Geographic Turns," notes is commonly being referred to as "research architecture." We have all seen it on the walls of office conference rooms and studio pits – it's the big poster that used to have plans, sections, and elevations on it, but now condenses them down to postage stamp–sized graphics to make room for all of the important stuff – the program analysis charts that analyze how people move from book stacks to cafés over a 24-hour period, the careful examination of the flight paths of birds, or of sunlight, or of voter registration regions. In fact, a project today could be wholly justified by an analysis of birds flying in sunlit stretches from cafés to voting polls over a 24-hour period. The diagrams would be great.

There is naturally a loss not only of depth but of optimism in architecture's abandonment of the critical, or even conceptual, in favor of the deterministic – the idea that architecture needs to produce new bodies of information that reveal problems, or "mappings," which allow it, in Gissen's words, to "chart emerging territories and analyze and crunch economic, social, and ethnic data" – one can only assume for the purpose of solving economic, social, and ethnic problems.[1] But architectural design is not only an act of problem solving, and the theoretical surge of "research architecture" – slightly misnamed, more on the back- than on the front-end – does no service for either research or architecture in always assuming the fruitful existence of a direct relationship between the two. As Gissen's article quite clearly explains, the "research architecture" he identifies is actually an act of architectural theory, not one of design. But as the discipline of architecture evolves, the boundary between a *theory* of "research architecture" and a *practice* of "research architecture" dissolves, leaving the design end of the equation less with another tool than with the burden of making a response that, perhaps unlike theory, it is capable of providing only in limited circumstances.

While nobody was watching, the actual research of “research architecture” as a theory intended to reinforce our understanding of architecture in larger global contexts – whether geospatial, social, political, economic, ethnic, or other – was diluted, mixed with artificial sweeteners, packaged with witty icons and hairline vectors, and sold cheaply in the world’s design schools, not only as a new line of thought, but as the newest and most harmonious of architectural chorus lines. This research virus mutated the red blood cells of architectural design, and our diagrams, which were once distilled ideas of buildings resolved graphically, became the tools that describe the circumstances *around* buildings, no longer related either to a “big idea” about architecture or to the *parti*, type, or genetics of the design itself, but rather visually trapping mostly abecedarian observations of programmatic, economic or environmental phenomena.

The expectation that analysis, process, or mapping is needed to validate architectural form should be the source of much contemporary design frustration. That a thing can be mapped, and therefore better understood, does not mean that a map can always produce, or even inform, a design action. Gissen notes this when he writes of a better future for architecture, which he thinks will come when it begins to accept a new cartographic narrative in which “buildings no longer emerge from maps.” Today, many of the buildings that do “emerge from maps,” so to speak, often degenerate into one-liners of their own: an analysis of programmatic zoning envelopes leads to a massing that, like some viscous and self-hardening architectural liquid, simply fills said envelopes, freeing the designer of the responsibility that used to come with making what was historically called a massing decision; or recognition of ethnically diverse neighborhoods spawns a flying bridge between the two. Even worse, and ever more frequent, the false misreading or manufacturing of information is used to justify a secretly willful design move. As James Corner notes when describing the Dutch matriarch, OMA, and, by extension, the bounty of her offspring, “The artistry lies in the use of the technique, how things are framed and set up.”[2] Data and information, so important to theoretical “research architecture,” are used in this genre of design merely as props, either reflecting cursory understandings of what constitutes actual “research data” or superficially defending design moves to the uninitiated – and secretly mocking those who buy this pickup line and fall for a second date, if not for a cleverly manipulated marriage.

In practice, the architectural lines that emerge from the analyses of “research architecture” allow architects to avoid design as an act of will altogether, because they are the direct results of data, which in the 21st century is not only easy to come by but also frequently unchallenged and mistakenly assumed to be efficient, intelligent, and, above all, defensible, especially by the architectural community – a community that has very little experience with either the gathering or processing of actual research data, but swoons for a diagram with swarms of arrows. The existing pseudo-military-industrial complex of “research architecture” academics teaching design legitimizes everything from the sincere, though simplistic, architectural solutions that purport actually to solve ethnic or social disparity, to the aforementioned study of local zoning codes that is turned directly into a building. “Research architecture” as a form of practice liberates designers from the need to design, allowing “design” to be accomplished without the punishable evidence of the architect’s, or even human, will – and it can easily be heavily fortified with a regiment of diagrams, arrows, and icons, all masquerading as evidence of “pure,” and therefore impenetrable, research. That our discipline adopted such "research" based tactics comes as no surprise given similar developments in other non-scientific disciplines that assumed a wishful "scientific" ethos over the past two decades. Relying confidently, however, on tenuous empirical understandings of data has been shown, particularly in the recent case of "finance," to have limited or even culturally ruinous effects when applied with less than expert dexterity.

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Whether it is the fault of a past or contemporary unconsummated relationship between architectural theory and architectural design or just a general cynical malaise in the face of the discipline's loss of consensus, we are left with an unquestioned "research architecture" narrative in contemporary architectural design. This new narrative, by virtue of its ease and openness to interpretation – and quick accessibility by even the most tenderfooted of students – eclipses the more historical use of architectural "precedent" as a methodology through which design is taught. The former demands information, which in our moment is as ubiquitous as Asphalt, while the latter demands knowledge and a dedicated understanding of the historical lineage of architecture – hard things to come by with a quick Google search. That is not to say that precedent hasn't had its own history of abuses, but rather that in our moment "research architecture" has almost entirely eclipsed its use with a new generation of rote creative shortcuts masquerading as the presence of architectural design. While the mapping of "research" is justified by assuming a legitimate cause-and-effect relationship between cursorily observed problems – whether contextual, environmental or programmatic – and their subsequent architectural solutions, the alternative of a precedent-based approach is based on the assumption that architecture is not only the solution to pressing contemporary problems but also a living trajectory of invention, added to by each successive generation. Knowledge of precedent is difficult to obtain – it requires more than a graphic reorganization of data, instead demanding study of complex spatial ideas throughout a dense and complex formal history. So if the weapons of "research architecture" as practice are seemingly rational solutions to observed contextual, environmental, or programmatic problems, then those of "precedent" are a deep involvement with a historical legacy, and the knowledge and intuition to recognize one's architectural contribution to a historical lineage of architectural efforts. And as "research architecture" has, however diluted, become the dominant, "information-based" form of practice, particularly in academia, the party line needs to be toed – lest students or faculty appear to be out-of-line.

It is perhaps a bit ironic, then, that in order to legitimize itself within the academy "research architecture" turns to precedent, the very ethos of design it threatens to replace. Both Gissen, in "Architecture's Geographic Turns" and Kazys Varnelis in "Is there Research in the Studio?"[3] comb through architectural history citing examples of "architectural research" or "research architecture," ranging from the geospatial illustrations of Cesare Cesariano, in his 1521 illustrated "Ten Books" of Vitruvius, to 20th-century extra- or super-architectural projects by Charles and Ray Eames and Robert Venturi. Certainly every discipline has its history of practitioners who work at its various fringes, but there is some conflation of the relationship between the "research" of these architects and the fact that they are all, even Cesariano, practicing architects producing actual design work. The Varnelis and Gissen articles share the ur-premise that "research architecture," or the more specific cartographic versions of it in the Gissen text, actually have distinguished theoretical lineages traceable all the way back to the definitive pre-Barbaro Renaissance Vitruvian text of Cesariano, like some long lost *Da Vinci Code* bloodlines of Jesus. And though both texts are insightful, this premise seems slightly overreaching, especially since the narratives of these particular practicing architects deal as much or more with historical precedent than their various love affairs with the projects of research suggest.

There are clearly historical linkages to be made for "research architecture" as theory, however infrequent the precedents may be. But there is no precedent for the trickle-down Reaganomics of "research architecture" as practice, which is only a reflection of a wholly contemporary architectural culture based on the easy, the quick, and the convincing, and on the frequent – at times even sincere – yet mistaken assumption that we are always more powerful in dealing with social injustice or inequality in our role as architects than in our roles as citizens or activists.

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Why, then, is the architecture of today so immersed in the process of process and the analysis of analysis? And why do design studios and practitioners insist on a foundation of "hard" data – especially the statistical densities that require architects to "crunch economic, social and ethnic data" as Gissen observes – to justify design? At the moment, architects are well-equipped to make original and important observations about emerging territories of economic and political space. The profession is less well-equipped to produce pure statistical research or to "crunch" actual statistical data, and unless architecture schools begin to teach data analysis that explains probability distribution, standard deviations, geometric interpretation, and Chebyshev's inequality, it is certainly in no position to use a cursory understanding of such data as required justification for design, regardless of the credibility of the intention. As the confident use of pseudo-scientific strategies to understand data was largely responsible for the current lending, and by extension global financial crisis, the possibility of architectural and urban failures that adopt the same loose strategy towards data should offer architecture a moment of pause, if not a split second of sheer terror.

So does our obsession with process and problem solving exist because we would rather establish a clear and repeatable working method than continually face the proverbial blank sheet of paper? Is process easier and quicker to teach than precedent? Is it because discussing the processes of "research architecture" in design gives us something to talk about in reviews, or something convincing to say to clients? Is it so that, as with abstract expressionism, we can forgo manual dexterity in favor of the will to discover? Have we, in fact, ordained process, research, and analysis as some architectural triumvirate version of The Jonas Brothers– an unchallenged design anthem to be broadcast on all channels at all times and for any reason? In order to avoid confronting a line that lacks a legitimate alibi?

Architecture needs the freedom to have inexplicable lines, and not-always justifiable decisions. That does not mean that architecture must be unintelligent, or that we cannot analyze, have processes, or map things; it means instead that architectural form cannot predominantly emerge from these acts – and certainly it should not rely on a manipulative or amateur misreading of them. It should also not be forgotten that architecture has functioned historically as not only a record of change but its instigator, and any architecture dedicated to solving problems discovered within an existing organizational system is therefore partially complicit in sustaining the status quo of that system-- or at the very least relegates itself to the weaker position of subverting existing standards instead of optimistically endorsing new ones. Architecture, then, when understood as merely a solution to observed problems, even problems mapped, analyzed, and somewhat understood, abdicates its historic role as an agent for truly radical intervention and revolutionary political instrumentality.

Since the practice of "research architecture" assumes intellection as a basis for formal production, it naturally discredits intuition and instinct as forms of intelligence, despite the historical position they have held for the discipline. Just as the Cesariano version of Vitruvius was enlisted in service of a historical precedent for "research architecture," so too can the original be used in support of design without intellection. Book VI, Chapter 2, of Vitruvius's *Ten Books* argues that architects in fact not only should deviate, at times, from the "rules" of classicism simply for aesthetic reasons, but that these necessary design moves are also "attainable by flashes of genius, and not only by mere science."[4] In fact, support for intuition as a form of intelligence pervades much of our architectural theoretical past. Henri Bergson, in his text *Creative Evolution*, argues that "intuition can give us what intelligence cannot, and can supplant it," and that "a theory of knowledge must include intelligence and instinct."[5] Contemporary support for the power of non-process based intelligence can be found not only in the emerging fields of cognitive neuroscience[6] but also in the infinitely

more popular observations of Malcolm Gladwell, who in his recent book *Blink* writes that "the task of making sense of ourselves and our behavior requires that we acknowledge there can be as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis."[7]

The discipline may have lost its critical depth, but it should not replace an ability to think, or even intuit, with an imperative to analyze – regardless of the flood of information and information-analysis tools we are presented with today. And perhaps architecture just needs a moment to think about new things other than problems. That problems need to be solved is a given, but solutions to problems cannot alone be expected to justify the entirety of the discipline's formal production. After the strenuous intellectual adventures of critical theory and our current anxieties about planet-saving and programmatic efficiencies, architecture needs the freedom to cast new lines in search of new forms of life from which to nourish and reinvigorate our discourse and profession. What replaces this pseudo-analytical justification based on "research," should be a space of speculation, of transference – a waiting area where architecture, as both act and object, is allowed to transcend the limits of its own form and become more than a problem-solving or energy-saving contraption of geometry, matter, and material. For architecture is able to produce qualities more rarified than rational and more ponderous than problem-solving, and fortunately for the future of the discipline, these qualities fly far above the horizon and will long outlast the new party lines, chorus lines, and one-liners of our current architectural amusements.

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[1] David Gissen, "Architecture's Geographic Turns," *Log* 12 (2008): 59.
[2] James Corner, ed., *Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 165.
[3] See Gissen's use of Cesare Cesariano's translation of Vitruvius as an early historical example of linking architecture and geography. Gissen, *Log* 12: 60. See also Kazys Varnelis, "Is there Research in the Studio?," *Journal of Architectural Education* (2007): 11–14.
[4] Morris H. Morgan, trans., *Vitruvius: The Ten Books on Architecture*, Book IV, Chapter II (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 174.
[5] Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 177. Henri Bergson's introduction of Vitalism in this text also offers insight into the limited understanding of subjects through only an understanding of their empirical qualities and components.
[6] David Freedberg and Vittoria Gallese, "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience," *Trends in Cognitive Science* 11 (2007): 197–203.
[7] Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2005).