

# PETER EISENMAN

## En Terror Firma: In Trails of Grotexes

*It is amazing how complete is the illusion that beauty is goodness.*

Leo Tolstoy

Author's note: The following text is a series of notes which merely scratch the surface of a subject which will be taken up more fully in my forthcoming book, *The Edge of Between*.

Recently a client said to me, 'Peter, for the past five hundred years the discourse of science has been about man overcoming nature. Man overcomes nature through things which are rational, which are good, which are truthful, and ultimately these take on the characteristics of the natural itself, ie the beautiful. Obviously,' he said to me, 'it follows that architecture has been about this overcoming of the natural, because architecture symbolises the structures, cosmological attitudes of the society: architecture mirrors what the society is about.' Thus, though not explicitly, architecture has represented and symbolised this struggle of man to overcome nature. 'Today,' he said, 'this is no longer the problem which science is addressing. This is no longer where the discourses on the forefront of thinking are.' He said that the problem today for man is to overcome knowledge: 'You see, computers have knowledge, robots have knowledge, the technological clones that we are developing have knowledge, but man has wisdom. The knowledge revolution, artificial intelligence and the systems of knowledge have gotten out of hand, and have started to control man, rather than the reverse. Science today is trying to find a way to control knowledge, and the knowledge revolution.' And my client then said to me, 'Peter, you architects, for too long, have been solving a problem, representing and symbolising a problem which is no longer where we are.' He said, 'I want you to do a building which symbolises man's capacity to overcome knowledge.' I looked at him and thought, what is that? He said, 'Do you know something, you are supposed to be an architect on the edge. Yet,' he added, 'there is nothing you could do toward this end that would upset me at all.' He said, 'I do not want you to merely illustrate the problem. I do not want you to decorate a facade with a computer chip, cut into the chip, and say, there – we have symbolised the overcoming of knowledge. No,' he said, 'I am not talking about that. I want something far more significant. I want something that challenges man's very occupation of space, not just the surface of that space.' He said, 'And I do not think that you can do it.'

Now why is this? First of all, architects traditionally do not speculate on the here and now, on gravity, as scientists do. Architects have to deal with the real conditions of gravity, they have to build the here and now. They have to deal with physical presence. In fact, architects continually not only symbolise the overcoming of nature, they must overcome nature. It is not so simple for architecture merely to shift and say that overcoming nature is no longer the problem, because it obviously remains a problem.

However, it is possible to respond to my scientist client and at the same time still deal with the problems of presence and gravity. To do this the architectural discourse must be displaced. The issue is not merely as it was in the past, that architecture must withstand the forces of gravity, but the manner in which this overcoming is symbolised. In other words, it is not enough to suggest that building must be rational, truthful, beautiful, good, must in its mimesis of the natural suggest man's overcoming of the natural. Rather, as the architectural discourse changes its focus from nature to knowledge, a far more complex object emerges, which requires a more complex form of architectural reality. This is because knowledge (as opposed to nature) has no physical being. What is being represented in physical form when knowledge is being overcome? Nature, traditionally, was the liminal, the boundary definition; it mediated, in the anthropocentric world of the Enlightenment, the lost certainty of God. The natural became a valued origin, both useful to explain the world metaphorically and as a process and an object to be emulated. Since architecture had set out to symbolise the overcoming of nature, it is more than reasonable to think that the overcoming of knowledge also could be symbolised. The uncertainty that is contained in something other than the liminal will certainly be part of the expression of man overcoming knowledge.

At the root of the present conceptual structure of architecture is the Vitruvian triad of commodity, firmness, and delight (use, structure, and beauty). The beautiful as a dialectical category has been understood as a singular and monovalent condition; it has been about goodness, about the natural, the rational, and the truthful. It is that to which architects are taught to aspire in their architecture. Thus they search for and manifest conditions of the beautiful as a form of delight in the Vitruvian sense. It was within such a desire that this form of the beautiful became as if natural for architecture over the past five hundred years. There were rules for the beautiful, for example, in Classical ordination which, although modified through different periods of architecture, much as styles change in fashion, were never, even in Modern architecture, essentially displaced.

In the 18th century, Immanuel Kant began to destabilise this singular concept of beauty. He suggested that there could be something else, another way to conceptualise beauty other than as goodness, other than as natural. He suggested that within the beautiful there was something else, which he called the sublime. When the sublime was articulated before Kant, it was in dialectical opposition to beauty. With Kant came the suggestion that the sublime was within the beautiful, and the beautiful within the sublime. This difference between opposition and being within is at the very heart of the argument to follow.

Now, interestingly, the sublime also has within it a condition which the conventionally beautiful represses. It is a condition of the uncertain, the unspeakable, the unnatural, the unrepresentable, the unphysical; taken together these constitute the condition which approaches the terrifying, a condition which lies within the sublime.

The terms of the grotesque are usually thought of as the negative of the sublime. However, this is not quite the case in architecture, where the sublime deals with qualities of the airy, qualities which resist physical occupation, the grotesque deals with real substance, with the manifestation of the uncertain in the physical. Since architecture is thought to deal with physical presence, then the grotesque in some sense is already present in architecture. And this condition of the grotesque was acceptable as long as it was as decoration; in the form of gargoyles, and frescoes. This is because the grotesque introduces the idea of the ugly, the deformed, the supposedly unnatural as an always present in the beautiful. It is this condition of the always present or the

already within, that the beautiful in architecture attempts to repress.

That the overcoming of nature, or the depiction of nature as other, preoccupied the Enlightenment and the technological and scientific revolutions, was obvious. In response, the grotesque as it was put forward in the Romantic movement in Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley, was concerned with rethinking this relationship between the self and nature. Therefore, today, the 'sublime' and the 'grotesque' deal with this movement between self and the natural, and the representation of this unease in literature and painting. If the 'naturalness' of nature is to be displaced in the uneasy movement between nature and self, then our ideas of the sublime and the grotesque must also be reconceptualised in terms of overcoming knowledge without losing the fear associated with the natural, and the fear of the uncertain, ie the fear of not overcoming nature, must be preserved in any displaced categories.

The fear or uncertainty is now doubly present; the previous uncertainty of the natural, as well as the uncertainty of something other than the liminal, that is the uncertainty of knowledge that is within knowledge. Since the conditions for the sublime and the grotesque evolved from the expression of man overcoming nature, other terms which contain this double uncertainty will have to be found; the form of expression for man overcoming knowledge becomes far more complex.

What does this mean for architecture? In order to achieve the necessary internal displacement, architecture would have to displace the former ways of conceptualising itself. It would follow then that the notion of the house, or of any form of the occupation of space, requires a more complex form of the beautiful, one which contains the ugly, or a rationality that contains the irrational. **This idea of containing within, necessitates a break from the tradition of an architecture of categories, of types which in their essence rely on the separation of things as opposites.** There seem to be four aspects which begin to outline a condition of displacement. The following four aspects should be seen neither as comprehensive (there could be others) nor as a guarantee that their displacing capacities will produce a displaced architecture.

A major displacement concerns the role of the architect/designer and the design process. Something may be designed which can be called displacing, but it may be only an expressionism, a mannerist distortion of an essentially stable language. It may not displace the stable language, but on the contrary further stabilise its normative condition. This can be seen in many examples of current architectural fashion. There is a need for a process other than an intuition – 'I like this,' or 'I like that.' When the process is intuitive, it will already be known, and therefore complicit with the repressions inherent in architectural 'knowledge.' Intuitive design can never produce a state of uncertainty, only, at best, an illustration of uncertainty. While the concept of the grotesque or the uncanny can be conceptualised and imaged, it cannot be designed. Something designed is essentially non-textual, because design of necessity involves certainty; something always has to be made. To attempt to design between uncertainty or multivalency produces only a superficial illustration of such a condition. If something can be designed it is no longer uncertain.

In the traditional idea of architectural design, form, function, structure, site, and meaning can all be said to be texts. But they are not textual. Texts are always thought to be primary or original sources. Textual or textuality is that aspect of text which is a condition of otherness or secondarity. An example of this condition

of otherness in architecture is a trace. If architecture is primarily presence – materiality, bricks and mortar – then otherness or secondarity would be trace, as the presence of absence. Trace can never be original, because trace always suggests the possibility of something *other* as original, as something prior to. In any text there are potential traces of otherness, aspects or structures which have been repressed by presence. As long as presence remains dominant, ie singular, there can be no textuality. Therefore by its very nature such a condition of trace requires at least *two* texts.

Thus, the second aspect of this *other* architecture is something which might be called *twoness*. There are many different twonesses which exist in traditional architecture already: the twoness of form and function, and the twoness of structure and ornament. But these are traditionally seen as hierarchical categories; one is always seen as dominant or original and the other as secondary (form follows function, ornament is added to structure). In the sense it is being used here, twoness suggests a condition where there is no dominance or originary value but rather a structure of equivalences, where there is uncertainty instead of hierarchy. When the one text is too dominant there is no displacement. When the other text becomes presence itself it obtrudes and loses its capacity for the uncertain. Equally the second text cannot obliterate the first text, but will be understood to be interior to it, thus as an already present 'trace' usually suppressed by a single dominant reading. This second text thus will always be within the first text and thus between traditional presence and absence, between being and non-being.

Therefore, the third condition of this other architecture is *betweenness*, which suggests a condition of the object as a *weak* image. A strong image would give a primary dominant meaning to one or the other of the two texts. Not only must one or the other of the two texts not have a strong image; they will seem to be two weak images, which suggests a blurred third. In other words, the new condition of the object must be *between* in an imageable sense as well: it is something which is almost this, or almost that, but not quite either. The displacing experience is the uncertainty of a partial knowing. Therefore, the object must have a blurring effect. It must look out of focus: almost seen, but not quite, seen. Again, this between is not a between dialectically, but a between *within*. The loss of the idea of architecture as a strong image undercuts the traditional categories of architecture associated with man overcoming nature; place, route, enclosure, presence, and the vertebrate, upright building – symbolic of overcoming gravity.

To deny traditional place or enclosure, suggests another condition of this displaced architecture, that is interiority. Interiority has nothing to do with the inside or the inhabitable space of a building but rather of a condition of being within. However, as is the case with the grotesque, interiority deals with two factors; the unseen and the hollowed-out. Interiority also deals with the condition proposed by textuality that the symbolism or meaning of any sign refers, in such a displaced architecture, not outward but inward to an already present condition.

Ultimately, each of these four conditions provoke an uncertainty in the object, by removing both the architect and the user from any necessary control of the object. The architect no longer is the hand and mind, the mythic originary figure in the design process. And the object no longer requires the experience of the user to be understood. No longer does the object need to look ugly or terrifying to provoke an uncertainty; it is now the distance between object and subject – the impossibility of possession which provokes this anxiety.