1988   JEFFREY KIPNIS
Forms of Irrationality

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It seems we are presented with a dilemma. If the growing irrelevance of architecture is the result of systematic repression, then it seems that the principal vector for the persistence and dissemination of that repression has been rational design theory. This is true even when theory in that form has taken upon itself the self-reflexive problem. As we have seen, rational discourse cannot give form to the necessary question 'what is (the form of) irrationality?' Irrationality and all of its conjugates – ambivalence, multivocality, simultaneity, the mystical and so forth – are collectively that which resist and exceed the rational form of 'what is?' In short, there can be no prospect, in terms of theory of design, of an 'improved discourse', of a 'more rigorous discourse', whether such phrases mean 'more like philosophy', or 'more objective historiography', 'more sensitive to the visual/aesthetic perception of the object', 'more sociologically responsible' or whatever other criteria might be applied . . .

In an effort to resolve this dilemma, let us begin to pay attention to a logical necessity. If no practice has ever been faithful to the model of rational discourse, if every design exceeds its principles, and if this condition is not merely historical but constitutional, then what is at fault is neither the discourse nor the practice, but the model of the relationship between the two. The rationalist model is already irrational. Thus, strictly speaking, at the moment of design, architectural discourse is not and has never been theory or history at all; once it moves to the question of design, it is nothing other than and nothing less than the morality of the design process, a gaining of permission for some forms, surfaces, and materials, a prohibition against others. In terms of design, it is therefore nothing other than and nothing less than the design process itself.

This condition, which in different words says that while the architect will always design for good reasons there are no good reasons for design, has, upon scrutiny of the history of design rationales, always persisted, from Palladio to Corb. What is proposed as different today is that we have come to a point where the ego correlates of design rationales, the good, the true and the beautiful, are themselves suspected as sources of resistance. Those correlates do not exist as such but are merely the forms by which negotiation is always already anticipated by the architect in the design process . . .

The goal for a design theory that explores the proposition in question must be to defer as long [as] possible and/or dilute as thoroughly as possible the inevitable encroachment of the ego's demands of negotiation into the design process. At the moment of design there can exist no authentic authority. No ethical nor moral imperative, no priority or precedent, no cultural or aesthetic responsibility rightfully restrains the exploration into possibilities of occupying material form. But design is always an ego process; it depends on the operation of authority through the architect and this is always already conditioned by the constraints of negotiation . . .

The task is now to overcome the double bind, to develop design processes that dilute or defer the constraints of negotiation at the level of the traditional ego correlates . . .

Currently, two classes of such design processes, which I term *absurd* and *surd*, hold out promise to accomplish this goal . . .

Both *absurd* and *surd* mean irrational, *absurd*, in the sense of utterly senseless, illogical or untrue, *surd* in the sense of incapable of being spoken . . .

In *absurd* processes, the operating principle is that, while the tradition of architectural logic is suspect in its authority, nevertheless the form of design logic can be maintained efficaciously if the sources of its motives and criteria for evaluation are displaced from the tradition of architectural decision-making. Thus pseudo-rational methods are maintained but the specific context, the sources of initial conditions and the criteria for testing progress in design, the process, is displaced from traditional architectural sources. For example, in the Eisenman Biocentrum project, the initial formal conditions were created by extruding forms drawn from biological symbols. These were then operated on with an amalgam of processes drawn from DNA replication and fractal geometry. Design progress was judged, at least initially, by the extent to which the formal manipulations analogized the borrowed processes and achieved new relationships intrinsic to those processes. As design proceeded, negotiation constraints were factored into the developing design . . .

In *surd* processes the focus is not on displacing architectural rationality in design, but on silencing it as much as possible so as to allow the entire self, rather than the rational architectural ego, to govern the design. The operating principle of *surd* processes derives from the fact that the architectural ego is but a reduced or narcissistic subset of the entire self of the architect. Thus the proposition is to construct processes that restore the architecturally disavowed aspects of the self to architectural design by suppressing the footholds for architectural rationality. The theme is objectification without rationalization under the assumption that rationalization – through geometry, for example – is but one process by which objectification can occur.

These processes typically begin either by choosing an external, non-architectural 'object' – a painting, a poem, a list of words, a way to behave or the like – and physicalizing the content of that source object. John Hejduk's work is a well-known example of such methods. Alternatively, initial objects can be 'prepared' in such a way as to remove all familiar architectural footholds. The design process can be described as the construction of a specific ritual by which the architect objectifies *surd* material. These design process[es] . . . are carried to the point of addressing negotiation constraints as well. (pp159-162)