# Towards a new new sincerity: meme architecture

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Fall 2018

It is time to forbear ties and define a new age that doesn't root or itself in Modernism. It is time to leap, rather than pivot to an architecture that can introspect without rejecting its past. K-Hole's Youth Mode interprets the contemporary condition as a set of Mass Indie problems, and identifies the potential of Normcore to adaptively and authentically respond to it. In a fight for relevance and uniqueness, K-Hole posits that "the anxiety that there is no new terrain is always a catalyst for change. (Youth Mode, p. 16)". Foregrounding this treatise in the anxiety that Youth Mode identifies, new new sincerity will critically respond to adapt architecture to the contemporary moment.

Sincerity, in this paper, is the application of an earnest approach, marked by the possession of  intention to do something to critically respond to a context, while being inclusive of history, and contemporary conditions. It is therefore intrinsic to sincerity to refer to the past, and present, and aspire to the future. Instead of dividing design theory into unique eras, this project is a proposal to consider the embedded history embodied in all architectural objects, and to think of how they may be lifted in the future into other work, to maintain their relevance.

## How did we get here?

Architecture is mourning a loss of authenticity. In the wake of modernism, buildings are a commodity. A city of icons accumulating over time will result in a caricatured city – a city as a still life. We know this all too well from Koolhaas's post-mortem of modernism's plague on urbanism. Forms multiplied across cities, through abstraction and repetition, left urbanism defenseless.

> "Now we are left with a world without urbanism, only architecture, ever more architecture."
> (Koolhaas, "What Ever Happened to Urbanism?")

In its evolution, architecture has been a porous filter for cultural iconography to impress upon it, influence it and inform it. Jenck's diagrams describe the frequent and overlapping nature of these influences exceedingly well – with amorphous geometries overlapping across time, with no clear sense of organization or directionality, architecture's revolution could never be flattened into a single

concept and any instance in time was the cumulative product of the history that preceded it.
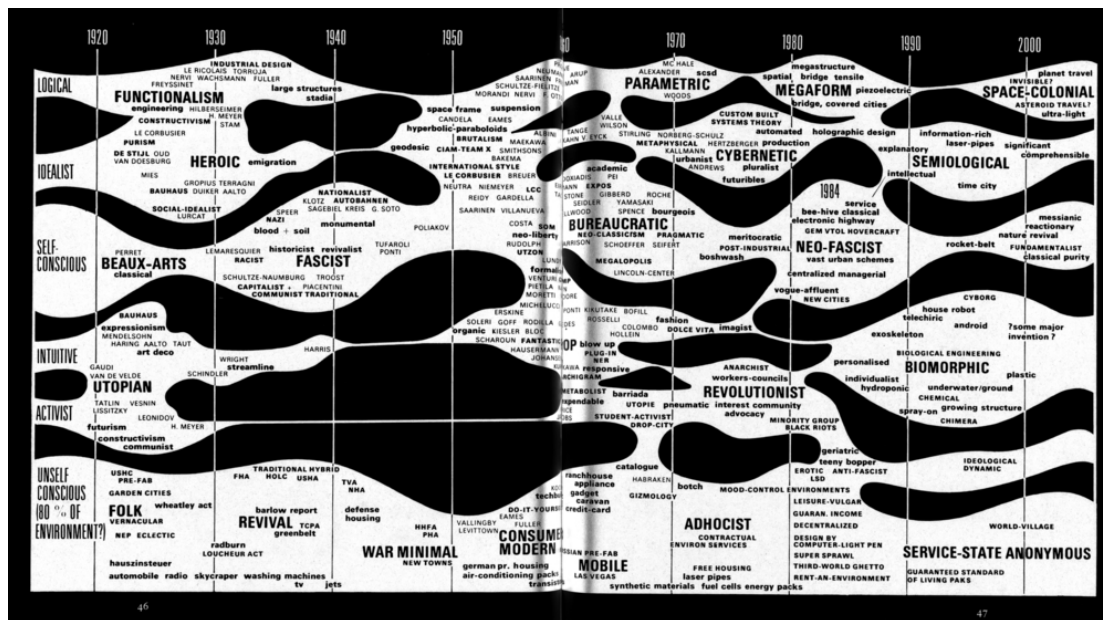


*(Jenck's Theory of Evolution)*

From the pragmatism and focus on function in the era of modernism, to the post-Cold War cynicism of post modernism, architecture was a mirror but still offered a critical perspective in its reflection of the world. With modernism, Loos discussed heavily the rejection of ornament to prevent obsolescence.

> *"The interior of the Apollo Candle Factory Shop in Vienna, in soft and colorfully painted wood, which was executed eleven years ago, is not nearly as intolerable Hoffinann's works are today. Or as they will appear to be in eleven years. The Cafe Museum, however, designed according to lny principles and opened on the same date as the candle shop, will not become unusable until the glue no longer holds the furnishings together."*
>
> *(Ornament and Crime, Loos)*

For Loos, and the Modernists, modernism was a campaign to keep architecture relevant. A rejection of ornamentation was a return to sincerity in its pursuit of the purest formal representation possible. Modernism rejected its historical past, and lingered as a residue of the president (even in the ways we label post-modernism and post-post-modernism). But modernism failed to be vulnerable, in severing references to the past (despite its intentions to respond to a then-sociocultural condition).

The postmodern, too, was a sincere but critical era, in its time. It sought to offer a public critique of oppressive and normalizing structures. But postmodernism was plagued with nihilism, and the degradation of resolution, marked by the McCarthy era. In postmodernism, there was no ground truth anymore – with a cynicism that continued to infect art and architectural practice, it still persisted through the fin de siècle and the across the Internet.

Michael Meredith's *Indifference again* highlights the role of architecture in responding to current contemporary conditions with elements recycled from modernist, and post-modernist moments. Meredith offers that calculated indifference and oscillating between "meaning and meaninglessness" is a method to produce an indifference, that in some ways, can socially engage better than other forms of discourse through architecture. This characterizes Meredith's brand of indifference as a sincere project. However, because this approach flickers between meaning and meaninglessness, it also flickers between deliberate intention and intentionlessness. This project can be made more sincere by being willing to *sometimes* respond with a more active voice and more meaning-full approach. Without it, architecture can displace sincerity by intentionally choosing to be out-of-touch in its attempt to be critical of current conditions.

With warring responses to modernism, post-modernism, irony, and a flood of changes to process and production, we enter a liminal age of possibilities with no clear path forward. This transitionary period of flux cannot result in an architecture that seeks to remain detached if it is to move in a direction.

Architecture has always loosely been tied to its sociocultural context. Without it, it risks withering in isolation from the rest of the world. A theoretical construct that is insular can certainly evolve and persist, but can also lose touch with the world. We must fight for an Architecture that is not out of touch that can still preserve its agency. Choosing indifference is one mode of response, but if everything converges to indifference, it obscures ground truth and obfuscates meaning. New new sincerity does not **aim** to flicker between meaning and meaninglessness, even **if** that becomes its consequent result.

"New Sincerity" is often attributed to James Foster Wallace in the 1980s, a warring philosophy to postmodernism's dense cynicism and self-referentiality. Wallace's project predicted a fleeting period of new rebels, who embraced self-consciousness, vulnerability and critiques of being banal.

> *"The next real [...] "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles*

*and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. [...] Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how banal'".*

*(E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction, Wallace)*

Wallace's new sincerity was in direct opposition to postmodernism's critique, shielded by thickets of cynicism. New sincerity hid behind nothing – it was refreshingly honest, unabashedly critical and daring. But Wallace's proposal also suggested its sincerity would result in its immediate death. He posited that this kind of sincerity was too vulnerable, and would pass when it emerged. If Wallace's brand of metamodernism/post-postmodernism/Postconceptualism did actually pass, it is time for its resurgence now.

Like Meredith comments, this dueling dual presents itself again today, in a new skin. New new sincerity will challenge the normcore, the hipsters, and the deep ironicists. It will have a backbone and attempt to stand for something. Normcore is hollow. At its core is a void and it's merely a protective veneer. Normcore, like iconic facades and renderings, lack a substantial interior that have the potential to be vulnerable. Renderings and passive rejection of all things have replaced intimate models, and active decisions.

Shia LaBeouf's iconic "Just Do It" video captures the ethos of new new sincerity well.  In his performance, he stands in front of a green screen, an open invitation to overlay his own content over any background. He allows himself to be vulnerable in this way, and allows his material to be inflected by the viewers that pass through it. Instead of hiding behind a veneer, he invites critical feedback and launches a campaign for public response. This performance has become a theater.

The video is carried by undercurrents of a consuming intestinal pain that intensifies with his motivational rant. He is distressed, contorts himself over the course of the video, and is fiercely dramatic. This video grounds its sincerity in its deployment – within even hours of its publishing, "Just Do It" had already found itself edited in several ways, woven in contexts ranging from fake TED talks to commencement speeches to popular iconic movie scenes.

An architecture for sincerity is one of **resilience**, **collaboration**, and **systemic reach**. An architecture for sincerity does not reject its historical context. It welcomes the opportunity to be critiqued itself, and openly can critique other conditions and works around it. Its power is not centralized in the production of icons, rather in the creation of a networked system. New New Sincerity grounds its strength in its connections – references to history, other disciplines, and to itself. An architecture for sincerity does not claim to be something it is not, but acknowledges that it is situated in a liminal limbo in this network. Like a meme, products of a project in new new sincerity intentionally offer an open mind, rather than choosing the potential of meaninglessness (ambiguity vs meaninglessness).
In practice, New new sincerity will allow for architecture to adapt to new contexts. Architectural projects will not need to rely on only themselves to endure because they will be embedded in a rich sociocultural context that is adaptive, because it is always responding to something. They will no longer be able to ignore their contexts the way modernist projects severed their ties to the past. They, instead, will be empowered to face future obsolescence, changing surroundings, and changing publics. They will need to be considerate about their posture in different cultural environments. This kind of discursive project will create an architecture that actually has the potential to fight to remain relevant, while being fully self-aware. It will be resilient.

New new sincerity will allow architecture to embrace other disciplines more openly. It will create an inclusive environment of collaboration that accepts the experimental use of new paradigms, materials and processes. Finally, New new sincerity will have a systemic reach. It will be pervasive because it will allow itself to be impressed upon by society. It won't operate at a unit level and will deeply intensify its attention on the part-to-whole and part-to-part relationships in a much broader urban fabric.

New new sincerity will manifest in architectural memes. Like Richard Dawkins suggests in his own *The Selfish Gene,* memes are units of cultural currency that replicate, spread, and compete for retention in a Darwinian. Co-opted by the digital era, memes offer an experimental and contemplative space to respond to contemporary conditions in an earnest attempt to express *something*. Architecture has always historically functioned like this, by producing a lineage of icons and referents, tropes and eras that evolved along the same model. However, the *digital* meme, unlike traditional architecture, is liberated from the fear of obsolescence because it is a theater for continuous and adaptive change that can be built upon[1]. Rather than presenting as finished pieces, memes selfishly ground themselves in ambiguity and do not need to worry about where they will eventually go. Without this looming existential dread, they somehow manage to evince the fear of obsolescence by allowing themselves to be co-opted, appropriated and adapted. Like LaBeouf's performance, architectural memes can introduce new new sincerity into critical theory and the built environment to renew urbanism, and keep architecture relevant.

> *"I now close the topic of the new replicators, and end the chapter on a note of qualified hope. One unique feature of man, which may or may not have evolved memically, is his capacity for conscious foresight. Selfish genes (and, if you allow the speculation of this chapter, memes too) have no foresight. They are unconscious, blind, replicators. The fact that they replicate, together with certain further conditions means, willy nilly, that they will tend towards the evolution of qualities which, in the special sense of this book, can be called selfish. A simple replicator, whether gene or meme, cannot be expected to forgo short-term selfish advantage even if it would really pay it, in the long term, to do so. "*
>
> *(Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene)*

Dawkin's classification of selfish replication can be a critical and sincere approach to the anxiety of this era. New new sincerity will consider the environmental and cultural conditions both from the past, and the present, and give rise to a vulnerable authenticity that will keep architecture critical, but soft, resolute, but porous, and candid, but considerate.

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[1] http://www.as.miami.edu/personal/sevnine/Batman.htm

# How to make a sincere meme
*A guide to achieving architectural immortality*


**(1) Do Your Research[2] / [Know your meme](#).**
Staying relevant and sincere requires a deep understanding of what comes before. After all, generating your own icon in a saturated post-digital age is only possible if it can offer a response to a sociocultural stimulus that will pick it up, and render it relevant. Know the context of the subculture you want to operate in, and give sincere thoughtfulness to this stage of the process. Without it, this is immediately insincere appropriation.

**(2) Choose a meme / Pick a template.**
Choose an icon, a moment, or a cultural unit to respond to. Choose a precedent to reference, whether it is borrowed from culture, or even a different discipline. It should be something that already bears some kind of cultural value because without that, it has no foundation to be built upon. The more people the icon is known to, the more potential it has to be referenced in the future. But also, the more it will be tied to its preceding context.

**(3) Construct a dialectic, choose a position / Make your meme.**
Inflect on the base meme, and respond to the contemporary moment. It is not a valid position to take no position because that is not a response. But it is valid to not believe with full conviction that your response is correct. If you choose to construct an icon and invent a new meme instead, you must still choose a position.

**(4) Offer a stage for response / Find the right audience.**
Allow your position to be vulnerable and exposed – build in the opportunity for a response. Do not submerge it behind a façade, or offer it as an after-thought. Make it known and evident so that it can be responded to, to construct a memetic lineage.

**(5) Go viral / Go viral.**
Realize the project and identify a medium through which it can spread as a new agent in a lineage of memes. Make sure that the lineage this current instance of a meme came from is recognizable (though it doesn't have to be dominating), to make sure strands of this objects history can continue to last. Detaching a new meme from its predecessors disavows its preceding history.

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[2] Burgett, Gannon. *How to Make a Meme*, Digital Trends, 20 Oct., 2018. Accessed 17 Nov., 2018.
https://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/how-to-make-a-meme/2/