

# ARCH-POP: IN PRAISE OF: IRONY, HUMOR, WIT, EXAGGERATION, READY-MADES, AND OTHER LOST CAUSES IN THE DISCIPLINE OF ARCHITECTURE

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In 1922, Mies van der Rohe produced a now iconic drawing of a skyscraper looming over the lowly three- or four-story buildings of an anonymous German town.<sup>1</sup> The image spells out an equation that is still in play today. We are now living through a neo-modernist phase where culture's messy reality is shunned in favor of the ethos of modernist cleanliness. And this applies even to the work of Frank Gehry. Let me, therefore, speak on behalf of that messy reality. Though it exists in all of our cultural dimensions, it has practically no voice in architectural theory. Preservationist, UNESCO, and government regulations make sure, for example, that city centers are as static and immobile as possible. It used to be that cities reflected their times—their modernity—but today city cores—and indeed often entire landscapes—are increasingly museological preserves. The old-fashioned dialectic represented in Mies's drawing between the modern and the old is obsolete. Both have the same agenda to control, exclude, and above all to purify our aesthetic universe.

There is a solution, though it is only a tactical one, and only for the brave of heart. I call it ARCH-POP. It is a design strategy that embraces our fascination with our obviously untenable cultural predicament. It is, however, not about design-from-below. It is not trying to give voice to the "non-architectural" community. Its goal is ask us—as architects—to think outside of the conventional "design" ethos and make use of cultural productions, tropes and critiques that may not require "design" (and the proverbial "architectos") but that can be designed into the archi-

tectural imaginary. Unlike computational architecture, which seeks to salvage beauty in the body of the machine, ARCH-POP accepts the productions of culture without over-determined aesthetic presuppositions.

ARCH-POP seeks the truth of rupture over the myth of continuity.

There is very little history to ARCH-POP, but perhaps, on the POP side of the equation, one could look at the Chiat/Day Building, Los Angeles (1985–91) by Frank Gehry (Fig. 1). No one ever talks about this building today, but what about those giant binoculars? And what are those oddly aligned "sticks" holding up the roof? There was a time when tactical exaggerations and borrowings were considered a legitimate part of an architectural way of thinking, but for various reasons, this approach died. Soon after making this building, Gehry abandoned his fascination with Pop. I see no difference now between Frank Gehry and Jean Nouvel. Both produce buildings of Teflon.

One of the sources of the problem is in the schools of architecture. Beginning in the 1990s, the study of culture as its own construction became a taboo subject in the schools of architecture creating the split we have today between form and preservation—between a mythology of endless choice and a pathology of timeless permanence. The world turned serious and one of the great words of postmodernism—irony—disappeared from use.

It is, all in all, an extraordinarily provocative design, especially as an alternative to the seductive tree romance of Avatar, which I see as extending the current (basically masculine) heroic fantasy of a computational fusion of nature and man. This tree plays on the difference between "nature" and "manmade." It is not a conventional tree house either, but has a modern—and rather provocatively standard—concrete building montaged into the branches. This syntactical fracture—in which both the tree and the restaurant are in quotes—is the key to this building's success. The design does not hide the restaurant in the tree, but launches it implausibly into its upper reaches, as if swept there by a great tsunami.

ARCH-POP challenges the idea of "ownership." All the basic images and imaginaries of the Nana Harbor Diner are nothing more than ready-mades. But by putting them together and placing them in a type of display against the banality of life—they get the core of the philosophical project of our unstable modernity.

Everything must be done to expose the transitory state as a cultural product. We can therefore take the Nana Harbor Diner one step further. My firm, ARCH-POP-INC, has, therefore, proposed to rebuild this tree—to clone it—next to the Stata Center designed by Gehry for MIT along Vassar Street in Cambridge Massachusetts. The Stata Center, after all, is part clone itself of the Gehry brand. So if architects clone their own work, and corporations work on the franchise model, why are we in the discipline of architecture so insistent in our pedagogy on our principles of authenticity and autonomy when this has long since been obliterated as a cultural model! The new Vassar Street tree is neither brand nor franchise, but an alien insertion that happily disrupts and exposes our cultural problem with "nature." Gehry's building is ostensibly a "sustainable" building and has received a Platinum Leed award, but it does not challenge us to think about either "nature" or "culture," or in the way their dual deaths are the only theoretical platforms on which architecture can legitimately operate. This new addition should make that possible. The area needs a good Japanese restaurant anyway.

What about the Urban Cactus of UCX with Ben Huygen and Jasper Jaegers? Unlike the other projects of UCX—which should be categorized as rather uninteresting examples of high-modernist reductionism—this building seems a bit more playful. It is defined by a series of curved balconies with trees on them. Is it ECO-POP? No. Obviously the UCX architects have not heard of Natalie Jeremijenko, who not only heals Polar Ice Cap Stress Disorder (get it?), but also plants trees upside down, as at MASS MoCA. The trees survive quite nicely. The project asks us to think about our manipulations of nature while at the same time showing us an extreme example of the non-natural. Had UCX hung their trees from the balconies the project might have been interesting, but as it is their project is little more than a tower with balcony plantings. The UCX architects, in other words, have not only NOT challenged us to rethink our attitudes toward nature, they have caved into the naïve notion of nature as an ideal—though constructed—landscape for the wealthy. That nature is constructed is obvious; that has been true for the last two hundred years at least. But do we engage that construction, how do we turn it on its head? This is what Jeremijenko does. Her upside down trees ask us to think through our expectations of nature. Had UCX really wanted to challenge the architectural cliché of the Photoshopped tree, they would have followed Jeremijenko's idea and hung the trees from the balconies.

Let me point to a far better project, the Nana Harbor Diner in Naha City Japan (Figs. 2, 3). It was designed by Takeshi Hazama and built by the engineering firm Kumiken Ltd.<sup>2</sup> There is some difficulty in knowing what to call it, but I will insist on calling it a building. Even so, it is not a project that would get even a passing grade as a studio project, despite the relatively sophisticated engineering that went into its construction.<sup>3</sup> The tree's bark was constructed by means of painted fiberglass reinforced panels supported by light gage steel frames. Hazama created small cracks in the panels and inserted mats and plants so that moss could grow from the branches. Eighty thousands small lighting fixtures were also installed on the tree skins and restaurant façade. At night, these lights illuminate and define the shape of the tree. It is an artificial/natural hybrid.