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Payback

or Towards a Non-Profit Architecture

Rafi Segal, Studio Critic

The banking industry has played a major role in the state of building no less than it has impacted our economy. Sponsored by 'abstract money' and through manipulations of financial markets, architecture of the past decades thrived as capital investment. Like the financial institutions it promoted, this architecture had to look rich, slick, stylized, not concerned with worldly problems and disengaged from the larger environment it should have been part of. The result was architecture of shining metallic and glass surfaces, mirrored clear blue rendered skies, superficial and detached, exuberant and highly selective in its perception of reality.

As such and to assure maximum profit, architecture was stripped of any 'risk-taking' that would deviate from previously proved and financially successful models. The architect was not expected to be truly innovative or envision any new ideas to improve human or social conditions. Instead, highly developed design skills were invested in recycling and re-packaging existing schemes, to visually excite but not dare propose a change in the social, economic or political status quo.

This glossy 'bank' architecture, however synthetic and flat, presented the appeal of being global, unconditional and applicable in any context and place. It expressed the presence of wealth, later revealed as an illusion of financial success, while the transparent glass facades became a perfect alibi for the hidden transactions that took place behind them.

As we have lost confidence in the banking industry, so in the architecture that came to represent it.

The studio calls to imagine a different kind of public -institutional architecture. It calls to propose alternative programs to the conventional spaces of monetary transactions, programs of exchange which favour the integration of the less privileged in society. The project's strategically located site in Brooklyn offers an urban challenge which demands an engaging intervention. Caught in between neighbourhoods and at the meeting of key transportation routes, the site has the potential to positively impact its surrounding urban communities. But shall this be done in the name of institutions which value money above everything else, or can we imagine a "non-profit architecture," that which aims to serve, to enhance the urban experience by giving something back to the city, to provide rather than to profit.