

The Desire called Architecture

K. Michael Hays

Architectural discourse in the 1970s famously developed a structuralist model of architectural signification. But the most advanced architecture in this "age of discourse" could never be explained by the very model it helped generate. For example, linguistics-based interpretations could not account for the brooding, melancholy silence of the work of Aldo Rossi; the radically reductive "decompositions" and archaeologies of Peter Eisenman; even less the carnivalesque excesses of John Hejduk; or the "cinematic" delirium of Bernard Tschumi. I want to suggest that a more adequate interpretation of the architecture of the neo-avant-garde must account for the complex machinery of Architecture's Desire. Marks of desire form a pattern in the works, a structured field, which I will summarize here.

Desire arises from the Lacanian triad, Imaginary-Symbolic-Real. Since issues of perception, subject formation, language, image, and code are fundamental both in the architecture theory of the 1970s and in Jacques Lacan's discourse, and since those two discourses are almost exactly contemporaneous, it is not arbitrary that we start here.

It is perhaps easiest to think of Lacan's three orders as force-fields which operate in every experience or act (including architectural experiences and acts), each one bringing its own particular characteristics and influence and possibilities. They are three turns in a Borromean knot (Lacan's metaphor), three laminates of a single reality, but they can be broken apart and used as a system of classification.

The Imaginary Order comprises parts that are infinitely substitutable for one another—what Lacan called *objets petit autre*. These are the objects of desire, or better analogs for the single object of desire, *L'Autre*, or the big Other, that has been lost and cannot be recovered directly. Aldo Rossi called the Other of architecture the "Analogous City." Rossi's architectural types, which arise in the "Analogous City," can be placed in the Architectural Imaginary. Rossi understood architectural types as entities, analogues of the social text itself. Types operate mimetically, which is a characteristic of the Imaginary made vivid by Lacan's mirror image model. And like the objects in the Imaginary, the

typological images from the Analogous City designate the original, defining status of man—"the Analogous City" concerns the collective imagination," Rossi said; it is "a synthesis of a series of [social and architectural] values."

While Rossi's typological, analogical obsessions seem to be a way of constantly confirming the determinate presence of the traditional European city—refracting its historical logic of form through a neo-Enlightenment lens in contingent, contradictory, and quasi-surreal ways—their peculiar mnemonic function also makes it possible to see in them a new beauty in precisely that which is vanishing. The originality of Rossi's work may well be its capacity to convey, alternately with melancholy or unblinking disenchantment, that the traditional practice of architecture itself is being forever lost. *Dieses ist lange her* is the title of one of Rossi's most enigmatic drawings. It is a perfect picture of the desiring field which is the Architectural Imaginary.

No one has grasped the radical anachronicity of the Analogous City better than Peter Eisenman. Eisenman characterizes Rossi's work as signifying the impossibility of meaning in our own time: "Incapable of believing in reason, uncertain of the significance of his objects, *man [has lost] his capacity for signifying...* The context which gave ideas and objects their previous significance is gone." Then he writes, "Rossi's 'rationalism' ... consists in the combination of logic—the conscious—and the analogic—the shadow... Rossi's conscious images exist only as a key to their shadow imagery. It is their intrinsic, often unconscious content which confronts the more problematic and perhaps fundamental reality of the cultural condition today."

The passage rather precisely invokes the Lacanian Real, what Eisenman calls the shadowy unconscious of the analogic, which is "behind" the Imaginary. The Real is what exceeds Imaginary identifications—all that typology fails to include. It is something that persists only as failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolves as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature. This Architectural Real is the place of the void opened up by the Imaginary exclusion of the polymorphous wealth of architecture beyond what can be imagined and identified as a type.

Lacan's Symbolic Order, then, designates the endeavor to bring to light something about the Real, but backwards, as it were, not through images but from its structural effects. The Symbolic Order is the realm of language and the law, of authority and its exchanges. And Eisenman's work around the 1978 project for Canarregio is Symbolic is exactly this way.

Eisenman's early work was concerned almost exclusively with isolating and elaborating architecture's symbolic elements and operations that would ensure autonomy and self-reflexivity of the archi-

tectural object and its structured determinants. At Canarregio, the grid of Le Corbusier's unrealized Venice Hospital project operates as the absent big Other—the law, the authority, the code, the architectural unconscious, what Lacan called the Name of the Father. Le Corbusier's grid is reduced to a geometrical abstraction and replicated onto the irregular fabric of the adjacent site. (And it should be emphasized that there is no better metaphor for the Symbolic than the grid.) Then Eisenman's own previously worked out House X1a—itsself a formal

record of the history of its own formation, comprising nothing more than a series of film-like stills that trace the steps from one state of the object to the next—is multiplied across the grid.

With Canarregio, one discovers the existence of certain bindings and constraints: the constraints of the architectural code or grammar, and of the social order, the social unconscious—in short, the structures of which Lacan has named the Symbolic.

We can summarize:

Rossi	Eisenman
Imaginary	Symbolic
parts	total system, ground, inventory
analogic images	digital codes
absence, loss of maternal plenitude	presence of dead father (Name of the Father)
memory of place, identification	counter-memory, tracing place
diachronic	synchronic
iteration	repetition
mimesis	difference, alterity

Late in 1973 John Hejduk traveled to Zurich for an exhibition of his work together with Aldo Rossi's at the ETH where Rossi was teaching. In putting the works of these two architects together, the curators probably meant to elucidate the highly reduced and precise formal, geometrical research that Rossi and Hejduk shared. But what Hejduk saw—for the first time—were Rossi's provocative and haunting drawings, especially for the Cemetery of San Cataldo at Modena (1971). The encounter with Rossi cut a crease in Hejduk's career, which between 1973 and 1975 would fold back on itself in a reexamination of accomplishments thus far and a reconsideration in the light of what Hejduk saw in Zurich.

What struck Hejduk in Rossi's work was not simply a typology of reduced form comparable to Hejduk's own: a limited range of single-volume elements, geometrically precise, fixed and continuously refined. What struck him was the *discrepancy* between Rossi's stated intent to subsume all of the architectural imagination into a finite, iterable typology and the dimension of Rossi's work that eludes or resists such enclosure—the discrepancy between the Imaginary and the Real. In the Modena project Hejduk noticed, for example, the estrangements and detournments from Ledoux's ideal city of

Chaux, Boullée's cenotaph, and Piranesi's Campo Marzio; the latent references to the *Sachlichkeit* of Hilberseimer, Loos, Hannes Meyer; but also allusions to the paintings of de Chirico and Morandi, the films of Fellini and Visconti, and the novels of Raymond Chandler and Raymond Roussel (all of whom, we found out later, were among Rossi's inspirations). Hejduk heard the multimedia babel behind Rossi's silence. The guardian spirits of the Analogous City were whispering to him. And he wondered about unleashing all that Rossi had suppressed.

The Wall House was Hejduk's only available device to begin to address what he took to be a challenge from Rossi. The Wall had the potential of radical figuration, and that potential would be used by Hejduk to structure a desiring field. Hejduk's preliminary response (in what seems at first a surprisingly tentative staking out of new territory) was the Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought, 1975, for the Venice Biennale, in which Hejduk took his already worked-out *Wall House 3*, reanimated it to stand as sentinel in a lagoon across from the old Molino Stucky building in Venice.¹ "The little house was colored overlooking the monochromatic, systemic, European world. What I am doing is I am the

questionnaire upon the question. I am the interrogation upon the interrogator. So when Rossi and all those things in Europe are going on, the totalitarian stuff which has to do with deep political and social meanings, then I answer it with *The Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought*."

Other than the *Wall House* and the mill, the proposal is for nothing more than a courtyard defined by low walls with holes ("holes," not niches) holding containers with ashes, and plaques with the titles and authors of canonic Western literature. An existing abandoned mill, a house designed that same year, a courtyard—next to nothing. And yet, Hejduk himself sees this project as a turning point in his work: "People did see that [project], but baby, nobody talks about that project. The Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought was one man's confrontation with that whole European condition."

All of which suggests that the radical lack we feel with regard to this project is quite fundamental.

The *Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought* precisely constructs an elementary diagram of desire, according to which the unavailability or interdiction of a desired object, the Other—in this case, the Thought that is both dematerialized and made manifest in the ashes—becomes an attracting void of enormous significance. We recall Lacan's citation of Heidegger: "The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds." It is the void at the center of the Real that organizes desire. The cemetery is a template of desire.

Lacan stresses vigorously that this particular nameless Other, the void, the Thing, is the primary object on which is grounded all possible subject-object relations, and equally, the empty site that remains when entry into the Symbolic is complete. What is more, Lacan uses architecture as a primary example, citing the ancient temple as "a construction around emptiness that designates the place of the Thing." In Hejduk's cemetery, the Thing is the Thought, the central object of Western culture that cannot be signified even as it is the event horizon of all signification, that must be continually "re-found" but was "never there in the first place to be lost," (Lacan), in comparison with which all other objects—those Imaginary objects that both Hejduk and Rossi would repeat almost obsessively—will be more unsatisfactory substitutes.

Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought was for the 1975 Biennale. *Teatro del Mondo* was for the 1980 Biennale. Did Rossi take something back from Hejduk?

After this encounter with Rossi, Hejduk would construct his architectural *Masques*. In the tradition of the Italian *maschera* and the festival architecture of Inigo Jones, the *masques* propose various interacting architectural characters and human inhabi-

tants—architectural troubadours, vagabonds, and itinerants—that travel in caravans from city to city (Berlin, Vladivostok, Hanover), twisting the mundane urbanism of their sites into carnivalesque narrative events. The taking of place is the very mode of being of the *Masques*. The *Masques* open the lens more daringly onto architecture's otherness, to eruptions from the order of the Real, as Hejduk begins to catalogue his multiple, idiosyncratic codings of architectural elements—his menagerie of angels, animals, martyrs, and machines; his stylistic preference for basic geometric forms and elemental biomorphism (buildings that seem to have hair, beaks, eyes, and legs) combined with typological variations on theaters, periscopes, funnels, traps, chapels, and labyrinths; his thematic explorations of falls from grace, itinerancy, passage and transformation.

Around 1975–76 Bernard Tschumi constructed his *Advertisements for Architecture*—a series of architectural montages, some of which featured photographs of the Villa Savoy he had taken in 1965 while a student at the ETH, where he found "the squalid walls of the small service rooms on the ground floor, stinking of urine, smeared with excrement, and covered with obscene graffiti." How should we read these *Advertisements*? When they have been read at all, they have been seen as an explicit alternative to the over-privileging of pure, autonomous form by Rossi, Eisenman, and Hejduk (known in the 1970s as the "Whites") and to Colin Rowe's influential preference for the uncorrupted, pristine flesh of Le Corbusier. Surely this reading is correct as far as it goes. But Tschumi augments this interpretation elsewhere, describing the *Advertisements* project as a notational device to "trigger" the desire for architecture—an architecture of perverse pleasure, an erotics of architectural performance. Tschumi: "The usual function of advertisements... is to trigger desire for something beyond the [image or form] itself. As there are advertisements for products, what not advertisements for architecture?"

The peculiar visual logic of the *Advertisements* corresponds, once again, to that archaic stage of subject production Lacan termed the Imaginary. In the *Advertisements* the subject of desire is nothing less than architecture itself, architecture as such. Lacan's so-called L Schema from *Écrits* famously constructs the subject of desire as an effect of a dynamic structure of internal contradictions—including a relationship between the subject (S on the left in the "*graphie du désir*"), the desired object (a, on the right, the *objet petite autre*, denizen of the Imaginary), and that object's double, the ego (a' under S), which in this case can be understood to designate the *Advertisements*' mimicry of the commercialized, eroticized milieu in which they have appeared. The system of desire (indicated by a) is opposed to the system of identifications (indicated

by a'). The shifting, reflecting, doubled relationship between the object and the object-effect that is the ego, is indicated in the graph by the diagonal line, which must be read both as a vector of desire flowing between a and a' and also as having an implicit planar dimension, which is to say that it is also the image-screen of Lacan's mirror stage, as is made explicit by the label "imaginary relation," the interaction staged by the mirror. Written into this schema the *Advertisements* provide the objects of desire primarily as images, of course, immanent to the works themselves—the "morselized" photographs of the Villa Savoye are nothing if not *objets a*, but so are the ropes and fatal falls and text fragments (Tschumi is an absolute master at constructing appropriated images, often from famous avant-garde architecture, film, and photography, as intense, but forever lost objects of desire). But the images themselves are nothing without the flow of desire, which they produce but which also acts as their support. The eventing of the *objets a*—the presentation of them as substitutes for an architecture we want but do not have, the setting up of them as triggers—construes them as signifiers and mirrors them back to the viewer as marks of a specific, even unique and personal, affective architectural encounter—an event: *this* moment of experience, *this* sensation of architecture condensed here, *this* figuring of architecture that happened for *me* just *now*. Such is the performative dimension of this work—to constitute the desire for architecture out of an impossible-to-fill lack, figured by part-objects in a flash of recognition.

All this so far has taken place on the side of the Imaginary, where the architecture subject is elicited

by a movement of desire through part-objects in an act of enunciation, an experience, a performance. But as the L Schema makes quite clear, the more fundamental relationship that mediates all of this machinery is that between S, the subject of desire, and a big Other, A. Reading the *Advertisements* through the complete L Schema forces the recognition that the flows of desire structuring the viewer's experience are projected from and return to the locus of that Other, which Lacan calls the Symbolic (or language, or law, or the unconscious itself defined as the "discourse of the Other"). Architecture, the subject of desire, is not produced willfully in an act of consciousness, but rather is the effect of what is repressed. Note that in the graph, the image-screen absorbs the vector of the unconscious and blocks a representation of the unconscious, even as desire is an effect of the unconscious.

Now, at the time of the *Advertisements* Tschumi does not give a name to A, the Other of this Symbolic realm. But we know it already: it City in the sense that Rossi first introduced the relation of architecture and City. This is confirmed in *The Manhattan Transcripts* (1977) in which it is now Manhattan, rather than the Villa Savoy, that is the cathexis-object—a city understood as having an erotic, transgressive, and violent programmatic potential woven into its grid of streets and avenues. It is reconfirmed in the project for La Villette, which returns to Eisenman's interest in architecture's total system, but now with a concern for only the effects, not the form of that system.

The diagram of Architecture's Desire can now be completed as follows:

<p>ANALOGUE (Rossi)</p> <p>parts</p> <p>analogic images</p> <p>absence, loss of maternal plenitude</p> <p>Imaginary Spatial, images</p> <p>memory of place</p> <p>diachronic</p> <p>the iterable code</p> <p>blank, white surface</p> <p>realism</p>	<p>REPETITION (Eisenman)</p> <p>total system, ground, inventory</p> <p>digital codes</p> <p>presence of dead father (Name of the Father)</p> <p>Symbolic Absence/presence</p> <p>counter-memory, tracing place</p> <p>synchronic</p> <p>the reiterable code</p> <p>archeology of surface traces</p> <p>modernism</p>
<p>ENCOUNTER (Hejduk)</p> <p>parts</p> <p>becoming figures (affects)</p> <p>trace of Architecture's Gaze</p> <p>Imaginary-Real</p> <p>taking (of) place</p> <p>diachronic, theatrical</p> <p>the exorbitant image-figure</p> <p>decorative surface</p> <p>modernism/postmodernism</p>	<p>SPACING (Tschumi)</p> <p>total system, flows</p> <p>grams, diagrams</p> <p>transgression of Gaze</p> <p>Symbolic-Real</p> <p>dissolution of place</p> <p>synchronic, cinegrammatic</p> <p>the form-figure</p> <p>projective surface</p> <p>postmodernism/end-of-the-line</p>

Note:

- 1 The Molino Stucky was a pasta mill and grain silo at the western end of the Giudecca designed in late nineteenth century by Ernest Wulkopf.