

Bernard Tschumi

Architecture and Disjunction

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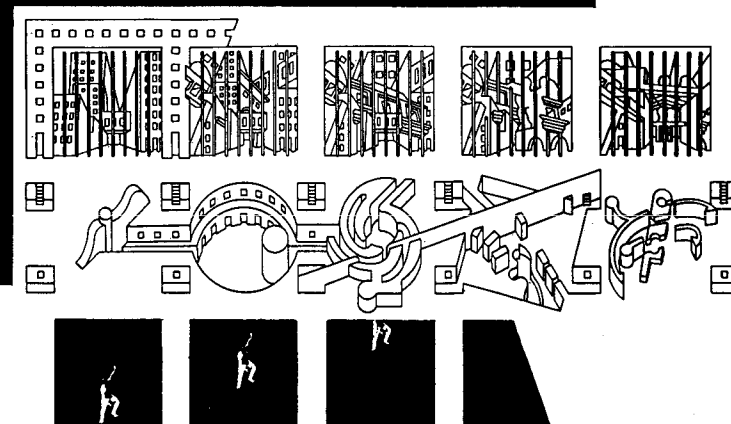
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Bernard Tschumi, from *The Manhattan Transcripts*, 1977–1981.

Paul Wegener, *Der Golem*, 1920. Set by Hans Poelzig.



Spaces and Events

Can one attempt to make a contribution to architectural discourse by relentlessly stating that there is no space without event, no architecture without program? This seems to be our mandate at a time that has witnessed the revival of historicism or, alternatively, of formalism in almost every architectural circle. Our work argues that architecture—its social relevance and formal invention—cannot be dissociated from the events that “happen” in it. Recent projects

insist constantly on issues of program and notation. They stress a critical attitude that observes, analyzes, and interprets some of the most controversial positions of past and present architectural ideologies.

Yet this work often took place against the mainstream of the prevalent architectural discourse. For throughout the 1970s there was an exacerbation of stylistic concerns at the expense of programmatic ones and a reduction of architecture as a form of knowledge to architecture as knowledge of form. From modernism to postmodernism, the history of architecture was surreptitiously turned into a history of styles. This perverted form of history borrowed from semiotics the ability to "read" layers of interpretation but reduced architecture to a system of surface signs at the expense of the reciprocal, indifferent, or even conflictive relationship of spaces and events.

This is not the place for an extensive analysis of the situation that engulfed the critical establishment. However, it should be stressed that it is no accident that this emphasis on stylistic issues corresponded to a double and wider phenomenon: on the one hand, the increasing role of the developer in planning large buildings, encouraging many architects to become mere decorators, and on the other, the tendency of many architectural critics to concentrate on surface readings, signs, metaphors, and other modes of presentation, often to the exclusion of spatial or programmatic concerns. These are two faces of a single coin, typical of an increasing desertion by the architectural profession of its

responsibilities vis-à-vis the events and activities that take place in the spaces it designs.

At the start of the 1980s, the notion of program was still forbidden territory. Programmatic concerns were rejected as leftovers from obsolete functionalist doctrines by those polemicists who saw programs as mere pretexts for stylistic experimentation. Few dared to explore the relation between the formal elaboration of spaces and the invention of programs, between the abstraction of architectural thought and the representation of events. The popular dissemination of architectural images through eye-catching reproductions in magazines often turned architecture into a passive object of contemplation instead of the *place* that confronts spaces and actions. Most exhibitions of architecture in art galleries and museums encouraged "surface" practice and presented the architect's work as a form of decorative painting. Walls and bodies, abstract planes and figures were rarely seen as part of a single signifying system. History may one day look upon this period as the moment of the loss of innocence in twentieth-century architecture: the moment when it became clear that neither supertechnology, expressionist functionalism, nor neo-Corbusianism could solve society's ills and that architecture was not ideologically neutral. A strong political upheaval, a rebirth of critical thought in architecture, and new developments in history and theory all triggered a phenomenon whose consequences are still unmeasured. This general loss of innocence resulted in a variety of moves by architects according to their political

or ideological leanings. In the early 1970s, some denounced architecture altogether, arguing that its practice, in the current socioeconomic context, could only be reactionary and reinforce the status quo. Others, influenced by structural linguistics, talked of "constants" and the rational autonomy of an architecture that transcended all social forms. Others reintroduced political discourse and advocated a return to preindustrial forms of society. And still others cynically took the analyses of style and ideology by Barthes, Eco, or Baudrillard and diverted them from their critical aims, turning them over like a glove. Instead of using them to question the distorted, mediated nature of architectural practice, these architects injected meaning into their buildings artificially, through a collage of historicist or metaphorical elements. The restricted notion of postmodernism that ensued—a notion diminished by comparison with literature or art—completely and uncritically reinserted architecture into the cycle of consumption.

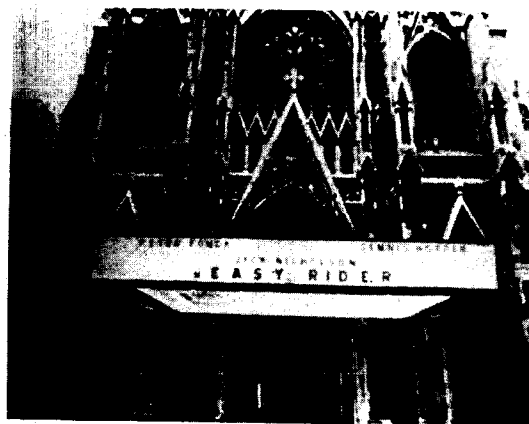
At the Architectural Association (AA) in London, I devised a program entitled "Theory, Language, Attitudes." Exploiting the structure of the AA, which encouraged autonomous research and independent lecture courses, it played on an opposition between political and theoretical concerns about the city (those of Baudrillard, Lefebvre, Adorno, Lukács, and Benjamin, for example) and an art sensibility informed by photography, conceptual art, and performance. This opposition between a verbal critical discourse and a visual one suggested that the two were complementary. Students' projects explored that overlapping

sensibility, often in a manner sufficiently obscure to generate initial hostility through the school. Of course the codes used in the students' work differed sharply from those seen in schools and architectural offices at the time. At the end-of-year exhibition texts, tapes, films, manifestos, rows of storyboards, and photographs of ghostlike figures, each with their own specific conventions, intruded in a space arranged according to codes disparate from those of the profession.

Photography was used obsessively: as "live" insert, as artificial documentation, as a hint of reality interposed in architectural drawing—a reality nevertheless distanced and often manipulated, filled with skillful staging, with characters and sets in their complementary relations. Students enacted fictitious programs inside carefully selected "real" spaces and then shot entire photographic sequences as evidence of their architectural endeavors. Any new attitude to architecture *had* to question its mode of representation.

Other works dealing with a critical analysis of urban life were generally in written form. They were turned into a book, edited, designed, printed, and published by the unit; hence, "the words of architecture became the work of architecture," as we said. Entitled *A Chronicle of Urban Politics*, the book attempted to analyze what distinguished our period from the preceding one. Texts on fragmentation, cultural dequalification, and the "intermediate city" analyzed consumerism, totems, and representationalism. Some of the texts announced, several years in advance, preoccupations now common to the cultural sphere: dislo-

Untitled photo collage, *Harper and Queen*, c. 1971.



cated imagery, artificiality, representational reality versus experienced reality.

The mixing of genres and disciplines in this work was widely attacked by the academic establishment, still obsessed with concepts of disciplinary autonomy and self-referentiality. But the significance of such events is not a matter of historical precedence or provocation. In superimposing ideas and perceptions, words and spaces, these events underlined the importance of a certain kind of relationship between abstraction and narrative—a complex juxtaposition of abstract concepts and immediate experiences, contradictions, superimpositions of mutually exclusive sensibilities. This dialectic between the verbal and the visual culminated in 1974 in a series of “literary” projects organized in the studio, in which texts provided programs or events on which students were to develop architectural works. The role of the text was fundamental in that it underlined some aspect of the complementing (or, occasionally, lack of complementing) of events and spaces. Some texts, like Italo Calvino’s metaphorical descriptions of “Invisible Cities,” were so “architectural” as to require going far beyond the mere illustration of the author’s already powerful descriptions; Franz Kafka’s *Burrow* challenged conventional architectural perceptions and modes of representation; Edgar Allan Poe’s *Masque of the Red Death* (done during my term as Visiting Critic at Princeton University) suggested parallels between narrative and spatial sequences. Such explorations of the intricacies of language and space naturally had to touch on James Joyce’s discoveries. During one of my trips from the

United States I gave extracts from *Finnegans Wake* as the program. The site was London's Covent Garden and the architecture was derived, by analogy or opposition, from Joyce's text. The effect of such research was invaluable in providing a framework for the analysis of the relations between events and spaces, beyond functionalist notions.

The unfolding of events in a literary context inevitably suggested parallels to the unfolding of events in architecture.

Space versus Program

To what extent could the literary narrative shed light on the organization of events in buildings, whether called "use," "functions," "activities," or "programs"? If writers could manipulate the structure of stories in the same way as they twist vocabulary and grammar, couldn't architects do the same, organizing the program in a similarly objective, detached, or imaginative way? For if architects could self-consciously use such devices as repetition, distortion, or juxtaposition in the formal elaboration of walls, couldn't they do the same thing in terms of the activities that occurred within those very walls? Pole vaulting in the chapel, bicycling in the laundromat, sky diving in the elevator shaft? Raising these questions proved increasingly stimulating: conventional organizations of spaces could be matched to the most surrealistically absurd sets of activities. Or vice versa: the most intricate and perverse organization of spaces

could accommodate the everyday life of an average suburban family.

Such research was obviously not aimed at providing immediate answers, whether ideological or practical. Far more important was the understanding that the relation between program and building could be either highly sympathetic or contrived and artificial. The latter, of course, fascinated us more, as it rejected all functionalist leanings. It was a time when most architects were questioning, attacking, or outright rejecting modern movement orthodoxy. We simply refused to enter these polemics, viewing them as stylistic or semantic battles. Moreover, if this orthodoxy was often attacked for its reduction to minimalist formal manipulations, we refused to enrich it with witty metaphors. Issues of intertextuality, multiple readings and dual codings had to integrate the notion of program. To use a Palladian arch for an athletic club alters both Palladio and the nature of the athletic event.

As an exploration of the disjunction between expected form and expected use, we began a series of projects opposing specific programs with particular, often conflicting spaces. Programmatic context versus urban typology, urban typology versus spatial experience, spatial experience versus procedure, and so on, provided a dialectical framework for research. We consciously suggested programs that were impossible on the sites that were to house them: a stadium in Soho, a prison near Wardour Street, a ballroom in a churchyard. At the same time, issues of *notation* became funda-

mental: if the reading of architecture was to include the events that took place in it, it would be necessary to devise modes of notating such activities. Several modes of notation were invented to supplement the limitations of plans, sections, or axonometrics. Movement notation derived from choreography, and simultaneous scores derived from music notation were elaborated for architectural purposes.

If movement notation usually proceeded from our desire to map the actual movement of bodies in spaces, it increasingly became a sign that did not necessarily refer to these movements but rather to the *idea* of movement—a form of notation that was there to *recall* that architecture was also about the movement of bodies in space, that their language and the language of walls were ultimately complementary. Using movement notation as a means of recalling issues was an attempt to include new and stereotypical codes in architectural drawing and, by extension, in its perception; layerings, juxtaposition, and superimposition of images purposefully blurred the conventional relationship between plan, graphic conventions and their meaning in the built realm. Increasingly the drawings became both the notation of a complex architectural reality *and* drawings (art works) in their own right, with their own frame of reference, deliberately set apart from the conventions of architectural plans and sections.

The fascination with the dramatic, either in the program (murder, sexuality, violence) or in the mode of representation (strongly outlined images, distorted angles of vision—as if seen from a diving airforce bomber), is there to

force a response. Architecture ceases to be a backdrop for actions, becoming the action itself.

All this suggests that “shock” must be manufactured by the architect if architecture is to communicate. Influence from the mass media, from fashion and popular magazines, informed the choice of programs: the lunatic asylum, the fashion institute, the Falklands war. It also influenced the graphic techniques, from the straight black and white photography for the early days to the overcharged grease-pencil illustration of later years, stressing the inevitable “mediatization” of architectural activity. With the dramatic sense that pervades much of the work, cinematic devices replace conventional description. Architecture becomes the discourse of events as much as the discourse of spaces.

From our work in the early days, when event, movement, and spaces were analytically juxtaposed in mutual tension, the work moved toward an increasingly synthetic attitude. We had begun with a critique of the city, had gone back to basics: to simple and pure spaces, to barren landscapes, a room; to simple body movements, walking in a straight line, dancing; to short scenarios. And we gradually increased the complexity by introducing literary parallels and sequences of events, placing these programs within existing urban contexts. Within the worldwide megalopolis, new programs are placed in new urban situations. The process has gone full circle: it started by deconstructing the city, today it explores new codes of *assemblage*.