

Jeff Kipnis

**WHAT WE
GOT NEED IS
— FAILURE TO
COMMUNICATE !!**

'How, actually, is a building by Corb or Mies or Koolhaas or Eisenman or FOA different from any other? What special thing does Villa Savoye or the Seattle Library or the Yokohama Port do? – Hath it not doors, hath it not walls? Hath it not mechanicals, dimensions, sensations, affections? Fed with the same utilities, hurt with the same weapons, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, when you prick it, does it not leak?' From *The Merchants of Venice Biennale*, forthcoming.

This whole damned thing about communication was provoked by a presentation at Princeton by Alejandro. From the looks of Sylvia's comments, he gave the same talk at UCLA. Surely by now, revisiting the problem of architectural communication is flogging a dead horse, particularly when such desiccated terms as

metaphor, symbol and other blatant forms of architectural signification begin to climb out of the grave again, like creatures from the *Night of the Living Dead*. Rossi and Moore are dead, Venturi might as well be and almost all of the other semantic and linguistically-oriented architects of note have by now either packaged the fruits of their research into a lucrative product or else moved on to more challenging lines of architectural inquiry.

Anyway, Alejandro said that because he spends more time with clients these days, communicating with them has become the focus of his interests. As a consequence, he continued, FOA has begun to take a second look at the symbolic in order to facilitate that communication. He then went on to show a series of projects illustrating his point: building as palm tree in Tenerife, building as film strip for the BBC, walls with bullet holes for a police station. Get the picture?

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His impenitent embrace of commerce, if not quite commodity culture, and FOA's flirtation with vulgar symbolism made many Princetonians squirm, a discomfort for which I was grateful, since not so long ago that school was the wellspring of American post-modernism in its most saccharine manifestations, and proud of it. Still, Farshid must be tearing her hair out, or having it torn out at John Frida's salon.

Taking Alejandro at his word, FOA resorts to a well-known expedient to solve a standard business problem – making little claim to greater purpose and crying all the way to the bank. Forgivable (certainly, who can fault success?), but hardly worthy of further comment. Yet other architects have managed to communicate with clients without compromise and in so doing have even advanced the experimental project itself.

Coop Himmelblau's BMW headquarters project, for example, recently

faced a precarious moment as the confidence of a cost-conscious client began to wane. Like most other corporate clients taking a plunge into speculative architecture, BMW underestimated the architectural conjecture as mere sculptural adventurism, relating to it in its most obvious but trivial terms as an image and a potential marketing device.

To ease the client's disquiet, Wolf Prix enlisted Imaginary Forces to help convey the particular spatial sensibility that is the actual but more elusive goal of his work. CHb's sensibility is all the more difficult to communicate because it draws inspiration so heavily from non-verbal and non-visual resources such as music. Thus, its salient differences are less immediately discernible, for example, than Gehry's appeal to painterly gesture or Eisenman's to syntactic relations. Imaginary Forces, a motion graphics studio renowned for its work for the Hollywood film industry, produced a stunning film walk-through of the BMW building-to-be that combined computer graphics, computerized motion photography of physical models,

blue-screen techniques and digital animation at a level of expertise heretofore unseen in an architectural presentation. The film functioned as a virtuosic performance of the building's architecture, and the client got it.

A critique of FOA's recent work, then, might judge whether or not the firm's own turn to the figure is an expedient regression, an advance in its research into a performative architecture, or perhaps a change in direction. But does Alejandro's two-faced capitulation to figure and client pose more general questions? Is there an un-theorized faculty of figuration that does not operate simply within and through the familiar regimes of representation, one yet to be exploited by speculative architecture? Even more intriguing: is there a case to be made for a wholesale re-conceptualization of the client as such within speculative theory?

For reasons that so far come mostly as response to piecemeal developments in other fields that have yet to coalesce into a cohesive line of thought, I am increasingly intrigued by the possibility of such a faculty

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and the prospect of its possible architectural effects. Some of you, for example, will recognize a suggestion along these lines in Deleuze's essay on Bacon. I am persuaded by Deleuze's argument that the figural element in a Bacon is not representation but neither is it a novelty, an invention. Rather it is a discovery that belongs only to painting; if a head, then a painting-head, if a scream, then not a painting of a scream nor a painting that makes you scream, but a painting-scream, irreducible and irreproducible, unavailable to paraphrase, a re-origination of scream that constructs its own sovereign portal to affect ('there are no feelings in Bacon... nothing but affect'). This figural re-origination escapes fealty to either of the great superpowers, signification and phenomenology, not by negation but by a calculated appropriation: using tinctures of significance and phenomena, it short-circuits through narrative and sensual

pathways to the nervous system, arriving there instantly as a fully-formed signal. Such signals are therefore not only material- and disciplinary-specific, they are disciplinary specificity itself.

Yet to me, Bacon's work falls short of pure, disciplinary-specific, figural affect, primarily because of the scrubbing, scratching and marks that indicate process, despite Deleuze's effort to exempt these. When it comes to feelings, if it feels like an index, it's an index. And once there is a sensation, a prickling of evidence, there is representation (of process and therefore of painter and therefore of intention and authentication, and so on endlessly), and meanings and feelings begin to cascade.

The figural effects I have in mind are better seen in works by Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, and Matthew Barney, or heard in the music of Autechre. It seems to me that works by these and other artists complete the undertaking that Deleuze's Bacon began: they use figuration, sometimes pictorial (e.g. Koon's *Balloon Dog*) sometimes

graphic (e.g. Hirst's *Valium*), to sidestep signifying effect, producing (in me) an intense, wondrous indifference. Utterly superficial, they are not funny, interesting, ironic, clever, witty, thought-provoking, pornographic or nostalgic, nor are they beautiful or sensuous, though faint wafts of all these scents are present. Nor does the numbness they engender relate to that clinical dispassion I associate with reflective or analytic intellection, a different pleasure evoked by conceptual art, Eisenman's architecture or the music of Boulez, Elliot or Stockhausen. Paraphrase lurks at the heart of such work, while any approach to the former that attempts a paraphrase is hopelessly misguided.

These works do not mean anything, they do not say anything, but neither are they silent. Operatic, portentous, liturgical or profound, Silence is the aim that non-figural abstraction pursues, whether gestural or geometric. These new works of which I write are not silent, not mute or dumb. It is not that they have nothing to say, it is that

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they do not say; they belong to a world, to an ontology that has no place for saying, even as a possibility. This effect, made possible only by the figural, suggests an un-theorized power of the figure.

I note one more feature these artworks share: though clearly the yield of outrageous production, they *reveal no trace whatsoever of process*. This erasure is intimate as much to their expense as to their ingenuity. Koons suppresses maniacally all indication of fabrication behind luster and finish; for his sculpture, Barney constructs elaborate process fictions, pseudo-narratives in film that camouflage the actual process of fabricating the sculpture. Indeed, it is thus and only thus that he exhibits not sets or props, but sculpture, wrought in material hyperbole, cast sea salt or Vaseline.

Should architecture take a turn toward the figural in this sense – and Alejandro correctly identifies that Foster's Gherkin would

be an important harbinger of such a swerve – the codicil of disciplinary sovereignty broached by Deleuze dictates that it cannot do so by imitation; it must find its own specific figural function from the discipline's own history of figuration. I think it unlikely that such figurality will derive from the gestural or unduloid (too indexical, too abstract) or from orthogonal geometry (too pre-emptive), but this is only my guess, as I await more projects. To my knowledge, no one in our field has considered the specific problem of the figure and at the same time mounted a critique of the indexical with more force than Bob Somol in his writings. Though he terms it 'shape', I believe he speaks to the same sense of architectural figure to which I allude, and he has even gone so far as to elaborate a number of characteristics that distinguish shape from form, gesture and undulation, such as meeting the ground with a smaller footprint than the major girth of the building.

Architecture must also find internal strategies for the radical erasure of process, whose evidence is manifold in our field, appearing not only in the design process and construction, but as strongly in the conceptualization of a project and its justifications – through analysis/synthesis approaches to site and program, for example. To be honest, I cannot yet even conceive of what this erasure means for architecture. As Greg writes, though the discourses of sculpture and architecture share many features, from a conceptualization of space to details such as apertures, and though both sculpture and architecture are wholes made up of parts, only architecture founds its discourse entirely on part to whole relationships and their derivatives. How might a building that is in essence a celebration of *assémlage* utterly eradicate its coming into being? The Koonsian approach of a hysterically refined finish seems a dead end; it would only produce a bad imitation of sculpture's achievements. Maybe there is promise in Barney's fictions?

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Who knows? Be interesting to see what you architects come up with.

To Greg's distinction I would add the **pictorial** as a possible effect of figure venerated in the tradition of sculpture with no equivalent in architecture, wherein it is proper only to ornament – that is, to part but never whole, reinforcing Greg's observation. Which is why I think FOA's current experiments are on shaky ground. In his effort to invoke communication, Alejandro seems to confuse two distinct referential possibilities of (whole) architectural form: the **pictorial** (a representational effect most notoriously manifest in *architecture parlante*, in which an architectural form imitates a reality from another domain) and the **significant**, which includes the **symbolic**, in which a historic accumulation of use and tradition imbue an architectural form or organization with sufficient density for the form itself effortlessly to open lines of

meanings, interpretations, associations and allusions within the field, as in a *palazzo*, a nine-square grid, a classical column or a formal sheer. An interesting debate today addresses whether or not box geometry, once an undisputed vector of non-objective abstraction in architecture, has become symbolic.

If the **figural** as discussed exists as a possibility in architecture, it seems to me unlikely that it will effectively derive from the pictorial, though I am by no means certain of this, and look forward to more experiments by FOA and others to test the question. So far, FOA has avoided the *parlante* platitude by dint of abstraction and a systematic functionalization of the pictorial elements, driving these well apart from Disneyesque representations. On the other hand, I still 'get' their forms – too much irony and wit, too much immanence. Better to put a palm tree building in Manchester than in Tenerife.

On the other hand, I do not 'get' the Gherkin, which comes much closer to evoking that delicious indifference. Though Alejandro's nascent intuition about the Foster building is quite right – he turned my opinion of it 180° during a recent visit to London – the fact that he has not yet fully grasped the ramifications of its form is suggested by his essay. In it, he consistently refers to the form as symbolic – but symbolic of what? A cucumber, a pickle, a rugby ball, a dildo? (Anything, for god's sake, but a penis – a real one shaped like that would just be too disgusting and painful to think about!!) Neither pictorial nor symbolic, the Gherkin approaches, I think, the **figural**. I note in passing that it meets virtually every one of the criteria set out by Somol to distinguish shape from form. In any case, I hope by now my point is clear: what we need here is **Failure to Communicate!!**

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And rethinking the client? Now, that's a big deal. Outside the academy and thus *within a common ambition to build*, the antithesis of speculative architecture is architecture conceived as a service profession. In service, the priorities of the client are definitive, an absolute prerequisite; all other considerations, whether of other constituencies or matters of broader intellectual or artistic interest, are negotiated as enhancements of or compromises to the priorities of the client. Social, cultural or intellectual ambitions, if any, are the prerogative of the client. The servant pursues the realization of the client's aims within the technical, financial and legal context of the project. To put it crudely, by satisfying clients, a service professional serves society. Communication in this context, then, is a foregone conclusion.

Speculative architecture, on the other hand, has heretofore banished the client as client from its discourse in the name of criticality and/or resistance, a legacy first of Marxist then Modernist negations. However

much the embodied client pertains to and affects a particular speculative project, client-effects are always local, anecdotal and thus incidental to the discourse of the project. The crude truism here would be something like: by skillfully navigating a conjecture in tact through the thicket of banalizations posed by client, technology and law, the speculative architect enriches society and, in the long run, achieves a greater good than that of the service professional. Critical negation asserts on principle that client, technology and the law erect banalizing impediments inevitably, because they are the very instruments of the forces to be resisted, cognizant or not, intentionally or not.

If, then, speculative discourse is going to rehabilitate the client as a conceptual instrument, a major revision to the structure of our discourse must be accomplished. Either the client as such must be exonerated, or negation itself as the principal of progress in the highest degree must be rethought. When the client is an abstract social entity

represented in the design process by an empowered agent, as with a public library or municipal planning project, for example, such an acquittal is perhaps conceivable. But absolving an unreconstructed capitalist in personified form is thornier, and when that client assumes the insidious form of the Corporation (e.g. the Gherkin), the prospects become downright treacherous. So, assuming we in speculative architecture want to keep pursuing work from rich people and powerful corporations without shamefully compromising principle, **what we need is a new principle!**

What principle, then, might supplant critical/historical negation as the credo of speculative architecture? Alejandro's remarks on the Foster building seem to suggest one. On closer reading, there is good reason to believe that he does not actually want his figural forms to communicate with a client, but to seduce the client adequately

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to distract him from the architectural subtleties that actually interest the firm. While on the one hand, he writes:

‘...what is promising about the *Gherkin* is that by engaging with one of the most populist architectural tendencies — symbolism — not only it did not lose any of its integrity, it actually used symbolism to enhance its architectural values...’

Yet, earlier in the essay, we find a less beneficent appreciation of the building’s architectural effects:

‘...The project’s greatest achievement, however, is how a building that was designed to have 60% of its surface rented out speculatively managed to evolve into such an idiosyncratic form. [...] Despite having succeeded in making Swiss Re a household name, at the time of writing the building stands half empty and is allegedly losing 35,000 pounds a day in rent.’
[emphasis added]

It seems that Alejandro celebrates figural form primarily as a powerful subterfuge, one that in this case has allowed the architect to seduce a client into a disastrous investment. Is not that failure to communicate? In any case, this seduction would indeed contribute a new twist to the traditional theory of the critical negation of the client: critical sadism. Now that idea is worth thinking about!

Less perversely, Sylvia has elsewhere suggested the intoxicating idea of restructuring discourse not by a new theory, but by changing its primary venue from the academy to the cocktail party. To its enduring credit, that move would require a dramatic change in the current obtuse manner of architectural writing, and negate (oops!) an entire generation of PhDs. More important, it would, by legal establishment and without additional theory, create a proper place for the client in discourse,

mainly by leaving him where he has always been. I am ashamed to say that the possibility I favor is much less flamboyant than Alejandro’s and less cool than Sylvia’s; it suggests a theoretical restructuring of speculative discourse around a new value: cliché-breaking. But I see my time is up; I’ll have to save that discussion for another day.

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