

Indifferent Urbanism: Graphic Standards and Urban Norms

Robert Somol

Professor
Ohio State University

P.O. Box 48649
Los Angeles, CA 90048, USA

phone: +1 323 381 0515
e-mail: somol.1@osu.edu



Abstract

Both critical and market-driven approaches to the city (radical and pragmatic) have made a fetish of difference over the last half century: from collage cities and contemporary digital visions of presumably “non-standard” production (the repetitive differentiation of cellular transformation) to niche marketing, just-in-time production, and consumer profiling. The challenge for a design politics today, therefore, is not to provide for aesthetic and economic difference, but rather to project a credible vision of the collective.

While once a productive terrain of investigation for a liberative agenda, the space of differentiation today has increasingly been absorbed by the market and technological default. Though perhaps seductive to those in former feudal-communist or existing bureaucratic-socialist states, it is important to resist the fashionable logics of “emergence” and “self-organization” as they often serve as crude covers for an equally sclerotic market, and make more difficult any projective political imagination or speculative ideological leap.

Not a market, a constituency or a patron, the city needs an audience, a fan base. Consider the “extreme normalcy” of Orange County, where the same spatial template instigates radical extremes of collective formation. An indifferent urbanism sponsors experimentation in diverse lifestyles precisely because it can take anything that one throws at it.

The statement for this session promotes a theory of difference, paradoxically, that has itself become standard over the last half century. Indeed, the value of difference has achieved such a cult status across all ideologies of architecture and urbanism that, like motherhood and apple pie, it now represents an apparently unassailable consensus. Against modernism’s presumed homogeneity, postmodernism, in all its diverse guises, has marketed a vision of the heterogeneous. Escaping this economy of the same and different, however, it may be possible today to advance an alternative economy of the indifferent. Taking its cues from the pervasive gas stations and fast food establishments of LA’s drive-thru landscape, as relentlessly and coolly reproduced by Ed Ruscha, such a project for an indifferent urbanism might first reconsider the denigrated status of standards and norms. Eat here and get gas.



Figure 1: Ed Ruscha, Standard Service Station, 1966



Figure 2: Ed Ruscha, Norms

To err on the side of at least not overcomplicating the obvious, one could say that recent architectural and urban design-research has become increasingly reanimated by two concerns: representation (what warrants expression or requires signification) and agency (how do things get done or who has the authority), or, in a slightly more specified formulation that registers the contemporary bias for exchange, particularly among the cybernetically-inclined, communication and participation. This current configuration of research may seem either shocking (“didn’t we finish with these concerns some time ago?”) or prosaic (“aren’t architecture and urbanism always about those issues?”), but in both cases the crude caricature is readily dismissed. Nonetheless, this pair of preoccupations still seems to demand responses from an otherwise diverse range of ideologies and forms of research and design. Architecture apparently no longer achieves consensus in the same way, but agreement is evinced in different ways. Moreover, the specific inflections of this shared problematic suggest that while today’s varied production may be responding to a common history, it is a construct that emphasizes not the continuity of tradition, but the logic of break. And, still today, the primary conceptual straw man for that break is modernism.

In this particular post-war construct of modernism, when it wasn’t seen as eschewing forms of applied representation entirely, the question of what was worthy of being represented was presumably self-evident: the spirit of the age, technical-material systems, the needs of a universally generalizable human

collective. The professional agency for this translation from facts to artifacts was equally obvious: the objective expertise of the architect-planner. Beginning as early as the 1950s, however, a well-rehearsed series of internal and external transformations made this shared consensus subject to increasing suspicion and doubt, just as its corollary faith in neutral forms of expertise also began to evaporate. For the last half-century modernism has “survived,” paradoxically, only through the critiques of its myriad discontents, uniformly accused (for various ends) as offering only homogenous and reductive forms of language and knowledge, its period of institutional critique by now far in excess of its period of imagined dominance.

Against this backdrop of the extended enumeration of modernism’s failures, the new consensus, hidden behind (or instantiated through) a rapid turnover of conflicting architectural and urban ideologies and styles, has been an unquestioned embrace of difference. From early varieties of postmodernism on, the crisis of expertise and the inability to credibly identify any form of collective consent has resulted in the representational obsession with how to figure difference—from collage and contradiction, through the unconscious and parasites, to continuous variation and the non-standard—and the procedural question of how to generate it. The sundry, invariably antithetical, modes of abdicating expertise have ranged from “giving the people what they want” (advocacy planning, community charettes, design preference surveys, the celebration of the vernacular and everyday forms of “architecture without architects”) to more abstractly autonomous or unconscious modes of form-generation. While early versions of the latter aimed to remove the subjectivity of the architect in favor of variously specified design procedures (architecture as conceptual art), in today’s neo-surreal context they often conversely imply removing the objectivity of the architect in favor of algorithmically-scripted construction processes (building as *chia pet*). Combining ecological metaphors and computational logics, the indexically autonomous moment of the day, with its rhetorics of emergence and self-organization, issues from a new form of complexity, now bio-material rather than literary-aesthetic: the shift from Robert Venturi’s “less is a bore” to Kevin Kelly’s “more is different.”

Looking elsewhere for a coherent design agenda (e.g., externally to some specified group, or internally to the autonomy of the discipline itself) has caused architecture to fracture along still identifiable fault lines, seemingly compelled either to follow trends—normative, corporate, or popularly thematic, whether in commercial-market or bureaucratic-policy modes—or to carve out a limited domain for a resistant practice (the forms of criticality associated with experimental-academic design culture). This increasing self-consciousness (or failure of nerve) among architects and urbanists that followed in the wake of modernism consequently led to abandoning any hope for an instrumental architecture. Thus, the quest for a design politics of difference combined with a displaced form of agency has resulted in cynical appropriation (corporate), do-gooder deference (governmental), or oppositional neglect (academic). More recently, a series of self-similar products cooked up in the lab by the cyberne-cology set have simulated a would-be synthesis of this double abdication, combining external inputs and process automism to decidedly apolitical ends.

Not surprisingly, as representation and agency come to be subtly elided as communication and participation, the distinction between them begins to dissolve. And, indeed, an entire techno-conceptual apparatus—with its values of flexibility, feedback, responsiveness, just-in-time production, mass customization, rapid prototyping, parametric modeling, associative design, and so on—are marshaled as trophies for the contemporary holy grail of “interactivity.” To date, architecture has benefited from these experiments by now including within its repertoire of clichés projects that once might have filled a local science fair nerd with awe: invariably installation-scaled “walls” generated through a series of randomly scripted functions in the virtual realm that serve to record, and then reflect or amplify, some equally arbitrary condition of the environment: air flow, light, temperature, sound, body movement, etc. An infantilized version of participation or interactivity, this bio-technical feedback terminates with life experienced in an echo chamber, producing more noise than significance. Just as the architectural “gap” between documentation and construction is purportedly collapsed in these mouse-whipped acts of techno-alchemy (the 98-gigabyte-weakening version of the previously macho “design-build” posing), so too that between representation and agency is imagined as finally “resolved”: the representation is the participation (or a material index of some production processes), the participation engenders the representation (as emergent phenomenon). Tautology as space. This is this, redux. Q.E.D.

Against this contemporary compromise, there have been a few design initiatives that have attempted to open new forms of instrumentality for the practices of architecture and urbanism. Though offering substantially divergent visions, the so-called New Urbanism in the US and a group of largely Dutch-inspired offices in Europe have pursued ways of stimulating a realignment of the commercial market and public policy with an informed disciplinarity. In attempting to reframe complexity as a model for political economy rather than formal procedure, work like this as well as that of Roger Sherman understands architecture and urbanism primarily as a function of property relations, the network of rights and obligations established via private contract and public regulation. The peculiar mix of market and government forces today produces an erosion of the old public-private divide, where formerly the one would have “neutrally” established the organization and infrastructure for the expression of building block or urban event by the other. Today, in a context where once public “takings” through eminent domain have been persistently expanded and legally approved solely for the ends of private development, the commercial sector is as often responsible for the engineering of massive infrastructure (e.g., privately developed and maintained toll roads) while the government has spectacularly begun to trade in the branding of unique identity.

Within the political sphere, this structural reorganization of the market has paralleled the transition from general citizen to local constituency to single issue group, as any universal notion of a public good has been systematically displaced by serial special interests. Entire national elections, it seems, can now be predicted and decided by a single precinct, such that the concept of a general campaign has become obsolete, as vast areas of presumably “uncontested” territory go without political message dissemination (i.e., no use wasting blue money on “confirmed” red areas, or vice versa), thus reinforcing the social statics. The increasingly sophisticated forms of target market profiling and “narrowcasting” have delimited an envelope of expectations where incredible specificity is matched only by total lack of vision (“other people who bought this also bought...”). Modeled to perfection, the gap between chance (or possibility) and fact has been closed, a shrink-wrapping of what one might not long ago have called event and structure. And this ambition to short-circuit event and structure tellingly appears to motivate many of the cybernetic crowd as well. But of course, once events have this degree of self-fulfilling predictability, they are no longer “events” in any real sense.

Beginning from the effects of liberal-individualism as currently institutionalized, previous notions of the collective are no longer sustainable in the present political economy. Rather than nominate some artificial group or retreat to procedural autonomy, one might instead observe the spatial implications of bargaining among various stakeholders in specific urban contexts. Where Sanford Kwinter has significantly introduced one kind of thinking through complexity in architecture by declaring that a form is an event (in a material phase space), the urban corollary may be that a form is an agreement (between parties in a specific legal-economic climate). A more extreme proposition for architects to accept than Venturi’s promotion of Main Street, the lesson here is simply “compromise is almost alright.” Within experimental-academic design culture, this axiom registers a significant shift over the last fifteen years from negation to negotiation, from the “no” of critical resistance to the “getting to yes” of a (largely Dutch) radical pragmatism. Still, one has to account for the limitations and possibilities of this geopolitical shift. In the context of Western Europe, the optimism of an unfettered market—the global regime of “Y□\$,” as Rem Koolhaas denotes it—can operate safely as a useful fiction because of the existence of a social economy with significant public initiatives and subsidies. In a social welfare state, the market model is capable of producing inventive, extreme and polemical architecture and urbanism. It can exist as a disciplinary project precisely to the degree that it never fully comes to exist as fact.

In circumstances where that market exists as an all-too-well established ground, as in the United States, it is not clear that this project can translate as successfully. When moving away from a now institutionalized critical project (that is, the understandably American reaction-formation to a fully commercialized world of “business as usual”), how is it possible to extend the projective, as opposed to complicit, traits of “yes?” If the genius of the Dutch experiment was to commoditize politics, to open a social bureaucracy to entrepreneurial risk and invention, the US context may demand the reverse, the politicization of the economy, to capture private investment for collective pleasures, a reinvigorated form of bottom-up eminent domain.

As opposed to something to bargain down or value engineer out of existence, design can more productively be understood as a tool of negotiation. Design is an instrumental process, not a static a

priori object, and as such is capable of instigating new demands and desires from interested parties, and may even fold unexpected players into the mix. This forms an enticing counter-point to Cedric Price's infamous advice to architects that on occasion they might more usefully tell a couple that they need a divorce rather than a new house. As a corollary proposition, design might equally induce two strangers to get hitched. In this sense "yes" is indeed a performative—like declaring "I do"—it's a legal expression, a contract, a speech act. Thus, the negation of (critical) representation comes to be replaced by the affirmation of performance, the parole event of a speech act. The shift from a critical to a projective architectural program entails maximizing the potentials for a contemporary architecture of doing, of issuing performatives, rather than the (now well-rehearsed) re-presentation of representational problems. Such an architecture and urbanism would venture to commit a saying that is also a doing, a specific territory explored in jurisprudence and linguistic theory under the category of "speech acts."

In *How to Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin elaborates the effects of a special case of utterance, the performative (more broadly, speech act), where the action is executed in the statement itself, as in nominating, promising, bequeathing, betting, and sentencing. Unlike the more common constative statement, which describes some aspect of the world and therefore can be judged in terms of its truth or falsity (as a representation of a natural phenomenon), performatives operate in such a way that the saying of it makes it so. Transformative or promissory, performatives are not descriptions or representations of this world, but establish the construction of another. In this way, performatives are not subject to evaluations of falsifiability, but are merely successful or unsuccessful, felicitous or infelicitous in Austin's terms, happy or unhappy. In this way, performatives also resemble norms, which are artificial constructs not natural properties; they don't describe how the world is, but prescribe how the world should be. This might further suggest that performatives and norms do not function along the scientific register but the political; they do not record facts (or establish terms of critique) but rather project desire.

These questions return to the issues of representation and agency, and to the surprisingly consistent answers these issues have generally received since the "passing" of modernism: namely, the figuration of a communicable difference and the de-authoring of design ambition via diverse forms of mediation or interference. It is these twin aims that seem to have reached their current apotheosis in the cult of emergence or self-organization: "Look, difference! And I had nothing to do with it!" But everything that exists is, de facto, "emergent." So which aspects of reality are acceptable in the canon and how can one make architectural or design discriminations? To argue, with an earnest faith in transparent authenticity, that things should also look emergent (whatever that might mean) throws the issue back on a cultural-political argument or personal taste that the neo-naturalist position has yet to address (indeed, probably cannot address) in any satisfactory way. So, after fifty-years of variations on the themes of this new orthodoxy, it may be possible to replace difference and diffidence with indifference and intention, at last declaring that modernism, even the plan and planning, was almost alright.

Returning to the projective ambitions of modernism is not least encouraged by the conceptual and practical challenges encountered by the varied consensus of a design politics underwritten by difference and diffidence. Most immediately and obviously, the slippery-slope issue of what scale difference should be manifest—within the building, the larger site, between city blocks, among urban precincts—was generally avoided as was its attendant problem that the triumphant project of articulating difference everywhere results in entropy: pan-identity. The homogeneity of distributive variation. This begins to suggest that one of the central conceptual paradoxes with the politics of difference is that it was ultimately founded on, and rendered equivalent to, a politics of identity. Secondly, as architecture's new-found modesty came to solicit anonymous or unconscious practices—whether the fabric of the historical city, the African village, the everyday commercial strip—the move from description to prescription, from what is to what ought to be, could never be fully resolved, nor how to simulate the bottom-up, or develop it second-degree, as designed.

Understanding the city and its architecture through the lens of property relations, contemporary urban form (and here the diverse examples of Orange County and Tijuana are instructive) demonstrates that various multiplicities have diverse interests in that which, to all appearances, is the same thing. The lessons of property law are that what seems to be a single thing can be utilized in multiple ways (i.e., it is indifferent as an entity), and that separable rights enable virtual traits and ways of valuing the same thing

to be actualized. Already, then, these lessons are significantly different than an economy of collage with its extensive references and fragments. The legal manner of distributing entitlements encourages the intensive usage of a piece of real property. Rather than celebrating legible or diverse fragments, a potential contrary lesson for design would be to put a singular thing into the world that attracts disparate interests. Rather than being suspicious of the single image, such an approach suggests the condensation of a vague whole that solicits multiple audiences. Within contemporary architectural practices, one can see hints of this in WOS 8, a heat transfer station outside Eindhoven by NL Architects, where a seamless black polyurethane skin wraps an inflected box that attracts various collectives and activities to its homogenous surface. Like OMA's more civic and visible Seattle Public Library, projects like WOS 8 are not driven so much by identifiable constituencies or pre-ordained stakeholders, but by audiences that are subsequently created. Nothing is designed for a given public or publics, but, with a fortuitous combination of preparation and opportunity, new collectives emerge from the design, indeed groups of fans.

This ambition to fabricate audiences, to establish norms in the fullest sense of plastic protocols unconnected to any claims of natural differences and identities, suggests a distinction between two forms of collective design politics today: the "Wow!-What?" and the "What?-Wow!." As a case of estrangement—of "intrigue followed by questions"—the "Wow!-What?" uses spectacle as a lure to criticality or decoding. Here, a routine form of exhibitionism (Wow!) is used as a palliative that ultimately displaces immediate satisfaction with looming questions marks and embarrassment (What?), restaging the critical self-consciousness or isolation of the liberal-humanist subject. Conversely, the "What?-Wow!" solicits shock as a basis to engender a new audience, the becoming-identical of a group. Something one does not understand from previous experience (What?) comes to activate a new form of pleasure and identification (Wow!). If Peter Eisenman's Cultural Center for Santiago de Compostela serves as an exemplar of the former critical project, OMA's Seattle Library serves as an instance of the latter.

Custom Massification

If the project of digital intricacy (and its currently presumptive product, "the blob") can be understood as the constative combination of notation and tectonics, an alternative platform of graphic expediency (and its condensed configuration as "logo") might be extended from the performative pairing of decoration and figuration. If intricacy was concerned with introducing the non-linear, with turning the geometric inside-out, one aspect of the expediency program is to make extensive references intensive, or to distill collage. In other words, intricacy strives to differentiate the homogenous (e.g., "hot up" Cartesian geometry, or individualize the previously standard unit), while expediency aims to make the disparate indifferent (e.g., "cool down" surrealist collage, or generalize the exception). Thus, the former selects the micro-articulation of milling while the latter initially dispenses the big outlines (or macro-monotony) of cartooning. Given these affinities, the fixation on process and production by the geometric intricacy crowd achieves its natural apotheosis in the goal of mass customization, a call that still prioritizes the individual subject. Less concerned with means than ends, the focus of graphic expediency is on audience and reception, and what might now be characterized as a custom massification, the specific fashioning of unlikely collectives and synthetic communities. Rather than offering parametric flexibility for the world as it exists, the graphic enacts a cultural-political world of plastic relationships.

As a performative, what can be called an architectural "logo" has become a primary device through which the project of graphic expediency takes shape. Although not the focus here, it should be noted that one of the important ways in which the logo works is that its operational effects are not restricted to building, unlike the way in which the fixation on assembly systems and object-figures by the intricacy group tends to limit their practice to architecture-as-product. The logo can, and often does, operate at the larger organizational scales of landscape and urbanism, as witnessed in OMA's Tree City proposal for Downsview Park, but also in much of the work of Adriaan Gueze and West 8, as well as WASAW's "Loops and Lilies," a collaboration by WW and Stan Allen for the Toronto Waterfront Competition. The logo can slip from foreground to background as the situation warrants.

In addition to projecting an artificial style of life and coalescing new audiences, the logo in its architectural manifestation enacts a hybrid state of figural decoration by overcoming previous alternatives (e.g., of duck and shed), largely through intensifying the incongruence of mass and surface, and condensing them into the monolith of a saturated shape. Indeed, there seems to be no other way of

accounting for the proliferation of decorated ducks and figural sheds than as the pointed if improbable meeting of the design-research of Venturi and Hejduk. Within this genealogy, the Concert Hall in Bruges by Neutelings Riedijk (NRA)—a zoomorphic totem wrapped in super-sized floral wallpaper—can be seen as one of the first of these unlikely hybrids. More recently, NRA’s Shipping and Transport College in Rotterdam continues this research, with its contorted “periscope” figure suffused with a nautical, blue-and-white checkered pattern of corrugated steel panels that erase any trace of building scale or construction.

Perhaps an early progenitor for this combination of shape and saturation can be glimpsed in what might be the ur-logo building, Cesar Pelli’s Pacific Design Center (PDC), popularly known as the “Blue Whale.” The PDC consists of a taut blue glass skin that operates in graphic indifference to its (highly specific) extruded profile. Like NL’s WOS 8, or MVRDV’s houses on Hagen Island, this monochrome shape has no significant trace of tectonic articulation or scale, its graphic saturation indifferent to constructional detail. The PDC ventures what Gilles Deleuze might have understood as a Pink Panther-like tactic of active disappearance, of becoming-the-world by coloring everything blue. Eschewing representational idioms of thematic difference or critical commentary, which is to say without excuse or elaboration, the PDC is big, it’s blue and, as improbable as this may sound, it disappears. Within this graphic trajectory, Herzog and de Meuron’s Laban Dance Center, with the toxic rainbow that radiates independently across its curved surface, finds its distant ancestor in Pelli’s Blue Whale.

HdM’s Cottbus Library in Brandenburg extends the immediacy and figural decoration of the logo in additional dimensions. An extruded amoeboid in plan, the Library is shrouded in a monolithic cloud of white characters, as if a gang of Robert Rymans tagged the building. The pattern at once conceals the construction and assembly system and produces the effect of an airy monolith, though one that varies under different conditions of illumination. Inside, primarily horizontal bands of intensive color operate without regard to the shape of the overall envelope, a hysterical form of informational graphics without reference. Periodically, these zones of artificially saturated color become adjacent to grey and white reading rooms, exaggerating the effect of inhabiting a mediated, graphic space, as one shifts between the colorized and B&W versions of the library.

As with Pelli, neither NRA nor HdM expect assembly systems to produce their “authentic” ornament (scalar, part-to-whole) as an automatic gratuity for their efforts; nor do they mistake the excessive labor and cost of developing overwrought design processes (now called scripting, the contemporary form of Eisenman’s autonomous procedures of design notation) or expressive construction methods (still called hi-tech overbuilding, the extension of Frampton’s faith in tectonic articulation) as “getting something for free.” Neither natural nor necessary, the plasticity of the graphic can only be artificially asserted and subsequently played out. In contrast to geometric intricacy, the delay of which addresses a selective reader, the graphic, fast and loose, condenses constraints into an image to collect an audience that does not yet exist.

With the declared failure of modernism, architecture’s field was chastened with a limited palette of professional inactivities: mapping, documenting, exposing, revealing, tracing, indexing. Though it produced some momentarily handsome exhibitions and career rewards, this heroic deference to what exists has accomplished little else. Rather than exiling it, then, modernism’s projective device of the plan needs simply to be updated, relaxed into the crackpot scheme, the wacky caper, the hopeless long shot, the smooth con game. Its uncertainty celebrated as its strength, not its failure. Rather than directly ask people what they want (the preference survey model of New Urbanism) or model a set of statistics and extrapolations (the data cape and scenario planning approaches of the Dutch), such a projective urbanism maintains an obligation to what doesn’t yet exist, and ventures to rearrange the world in other ways.

Both critical and commercial approaches to the city, radical and pragmatic, have made a fetish of difference over the last half-century: from collage cities to themed downtown experiences to contemporary digital visions of presumably “non-standard” production (the repetitive differentiation of cellular transformation). While once a productive terrain of investigation for a liberative agenda, the space of differentiation today has increasingly been absorbed by the logics of the market and technological default. The formerly collective metropolitan subject, and the concept of the political embedded within the polis itself, has been dissolved. In this context, the fashionable logics of

“emergence” and “self-organization” make more difficult any projective political imagination or speculative ideological leap.

The challenge for a design politics today, therefore, is not to cater to aesthetic and economic difference, or the individual subject whose trajectory terminates in the cul-de-sac, but rather to project a credible vision of the collective. Rather than manufacturing differences, this approach channels those that already operate toward unforeseen ends. By extension, this attitude is not concerned with “representing a public” that pre-exists, but venturing forms and systems of organization that invite new collectives to coalesce. What matters in the end is its effect: whether it merely confirms the status quo (even, or especially, the critical status quo), or can sponsor that which, by current accounts, has no right to exist. More than a market, a constituency, or a patron, architecture and the city deserve to attract an audience, a fan base. Build it and they will become.