

Indifferent Urbanism or Modernism Was Almost Alright

Robert Somol

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. 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. 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. The challenge for a design politics today is not to provide for aesthetic and economic difference, but rather to project a credible vision of the collective. 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. Escaping the economy of the same and different, therefore, it may be possible today to advance an alternative economy of the indifferent. An indifferent urbanism sponsors experimentation in diverse lifestyles precisely because it can take anything that one throws at it. So, after 50 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.

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.

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