arq (2014), **18.3**, 205–209. © Cambridge University Press 2014

Buildings produced by the forces of their time and place

Attunement to processes of place and building

Architectures of temporal affirmation

Randall Teal

'How can an entity with no discernible beginning or end be a place?'[1]
Fumihiko Maki

Architecture has long provided concrete expression for ideals such as home, nation, justice, democracy and spirituality. In so doing, it has helped to *place* them within society. The placing of these ideals has been an important aspect of both ancient and modern cultures, helping to focus, gather and structure many aspects of daily life, to mesh practices and customs with the assets of particular locales, and provide grounding for human existence.

However, when reflecting on the exemplars of this tradition, one must be careful to attend not only to what persists – that which appears timeless – but also that which is fleeting. For instance, Martin Heidegger, in his 'Origin of the Work of Art', describes not just the solidity of the Greek temple but also the *interactive temporality* that makes the perpetuity of the Greek temple significant.[2] Unfortunately, it is often this variable quality of 'enduring' that is forgotten in architecture.

Inattention to the temporal dimension of architecture has led many a built environment to simulate the vitality of architectures past via symbolic content, thus becoming caricatures of these architectures. Rem Koolhaas has referred to this phenomenon as 'pre-emptive mediocrity', characterised by a fear of the new that drives a pragmatically romantic desire to create places based on the stylistically familiar (for example, a Georgian terraced house). This practice, particularly pervasive in the mainstream building sector, traps huge areas of the built environment in a backward looking temporal vortex.[3]

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Although market forces and developers often motivate these practices, the discipline of architecture is not innocent. In particular, the valorisation – by design professionals – of eternal architectural qualities and constructions contributes to this collective neglect of the specific and diverse temporality that historic exemplars were once part of, and constituted by. In short, from the production of historic simulacra, to the on-again-off-again search for a timeless way to build, to the sanitised photography used to document and market new constructions, there is a frequent forgetting that architecture is fundamentally *in* and *of* time.

From timelessness to affirmation

Historically, attempts to think time directly have led to strategies such as: buildings that are flexible and open to modification by users; building materials that positively show the effects of weathering and age; architecture conceived as being composed of disposable parts; historical allusion used to give architecture meaning; buildings that respond kinetically to users and/or environmental conditions. Such schemes have met with varying degrees of success; yet, through it all architecture's claims to timelessness have persisted.

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The highest pursuits of timelessness have yielded insights by way of their critical examination of the virtues of historic architecture and habitation patterns, and have recovered important values that were obscured by later developments. However, the agenda of timelessness has tended to become simultaneously evangelical and banal because of its commitment to essences and immutable truths. That is to say, the search for timelessness easily deteriorates into seeking *the* way to build; and usually this quest does not end with principles alone, but also prescribes narrow views of aesthetics to narrow demographics and selective geographies.

Andrea Branzi sees one of the primary limits of this timeless desire in its tendency to focus on building form as the locus of architectural significance.[4] Such an outlook overlooks potential values that might be found in the instabilities associated with time, process and non-figural aspects of architecture. That is, the transient, heterogeneous and unplanned – things indicative of a living temporality – become difficult to attend to when focused on form. However, it is important to note that a critique of static forms does not equal an endorsement of the smooth, variable and anatomical characteristics of the digital

doi: 10.1017/S1359135514000554

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135514000554 Published online by Cambridge University Press

baroque. In other words, to be temporally affirmative simply means to acknowledge, as Branzi urges, that the virtual and variable phenomena of the contemporary world exceed 'architecture's figurative codes' and must be accounted for in other ways.[5]

However, acknowledging the variable phenomenon of the built environment is difficult because it places one squarely in a non-idealised present, a present whose imperfections are often difficult to love; or as Paul Simon once said 'everything looks better in black and white'.[6] The trauma of a 'full colour' vision of architecture is perhaps best articulated in the 'perpetual Jacuzzi with millions of your best friends' which Koolhaas calls 'Junkspace'.[7] In fact, Junkspace is not simply full colour, it is architecture with all the dials – saturation, sharpness, volume and contrast – turned up.

Although some would have Junkspace be an indication of architecture gone wrong, Antonio Negri offers a more insightful reading of this idea.[8] He suggests that Junkspace presents a vision of a culture trying to adapt to a new world of scale, speed, and connectivity. However, like all dynamic states, this state too will be succeeded by others and will eventually lose its 'plastic semblances' and move into an 'extraordinary physicality' comparable to the 'dreamy hyper-corporeality of [Francis] Bacon'.[9] Now, despite Negri's positive assessment of the implications of Junkspace, his allusion to Bacon leaves a vision that many would not find reassuring. Yet this statement is important and enlightening for the same reasons as it is disturbing – it forces a reconsideration of what is counted as architecturally significant and throws open the possibility that the future city (and its measures of significance) will be something totally unfamiliar. Or, as Fredric Jameson says, it is '(not) a problem to be solved, but rather a new reality to explore.'[10] Such exploration reveals a world struggling to find relevance and

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significance not by resisting the forces playing within it but rather by seeking significance *in terms of* those forces.

The forces of temporality

The city of Kyoto in Japan is a good example of this struggle. As a city, it is a fragmented mix of intensely beautiful works of traditional Japanese architecture, particularly its multitude of Buddhist Temples and Shinto shrines, yet much of the living city is a raw mess. That is to say – from the perspective of traditional aesthetics – Kyoto, especially at the single building level, is strikingly ugly. However, surprisingly, its urban vitality is amazingly potent, much more so than most cities in the U.S.; and this truth, when experienced, can shift one's impressions of the city from visual disappointment to existential appreciation. In this experience, one encounters a type of beauty that is unexpected precisely because it must be lived rather than seen. Further, realising that this urban vitality is driven more by the valuation of density, community, commerce, transit, cleanliness and safety than a programme of handsome buildings is anathema to many traditional ideas about great cities. Kitsch, impermanence, and brutal pragmatism collide here and, in this way, Kyoto is like the 'big, ugly, urban jungles, such as Tokyo, Osaka, or Fukuoka, which Japanese have managed to make so supremely liveable.'[11]

Such a state of existence, according to Okwui Enwezor, suggests that in Asia 'the idea of Junkspace as non-architecture is revised, it is the architecture'.[12] In other words, through the reinforcement of both Asian designers and citizens themselves, swarms of prosaic individual elements fuse into an urban thickness. Here, as degrees of thickness become the measures of urban vitality, an unfamiliar notion of aesthetic emerges. It is an aesthetic which is often weirdly delightful, if one can find the courage to affirm its excess, and might be described as a 'process aesthetic'. That is, an aesthetic that acknowledges how the significant experiences that form as different systems and elements of differing durations interact, react and transform one another continuously.

However, such an acknowledgement can only become active when change is regarded as neither threat nor novelty. The former denies

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time outright, the latter uses time for self-serving, primarily economic, reasons. In contrast to either threat or novelty, time as a process aesthetic arises with the recognition that healthy ecosystems are diverse and ever-evolving and that this in itself is beautiful. Engaging the built environment from this disposition points to a system where there is never a single agent responsible, thus form comes to be understood as the materialisation of numerous forces and processes coming together in both harmony and conflict. Here, it becomes difficult to consider architecture as something self-sufficient or *sui generis;* or as something merely autonomous and congenial.

However, such a disposition towards design is not unfamiliar. Landscape architects are faced with the design of environments that exceed the mere object, change with the cycles of day and season and evolve towards indefinite states of maturity. Further, their work must be explicitly responsive to given conditions such as climate, soils and solar orientation, lest it fail. So, the notion of an aesthetic based in affirming the processes of time is not without precedent, and thankfully it is a precedent that has found some resonance in architecture.[13]

One potential effect of architects paying more attention to aesthetics as a process is that control comes to be seen for what it is: an illusion. Consequently, design becomes an opportunity for facilitation or even provocation. Here, provocation is meant as a directed stirring up of the reality of a condition as it is found, seeking interventions that create fall-out and encourage places to transform.[14] However, creatively affirming the present conditions does not mean simply accepting what is given; rather, it means

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135514000554 Published online by Cambridge University Press

saying 'yes' with a discerning eye. It is perhaps comparable to actor Stephen Colbert's comment about improvisation: the first rule is to say 'yes' to whatever the other actor gives you because it always leads somewhere.[15] In other words, by affirming what is given, one understands that some aspects of knowledge only become available once the process is in motion.

The forces of control

The idea of not being in control seems a tenuous proposition for architecture. It is through the presence of uncertainty, however, that architecture can become responsive to, and grow from, the rhythms of life. For example, Branzi suggests that a critical examination of the Brazilian favela has the greatest potential for reshaping our building practices and the places that emerge from them. He believes this because the innovative, open and ductile systems of the favela indicate that a weaker urbanism can actually be a strength; that is, the favela demonstrates how instability and unpredictability can be operative in shaping more vital human environments.[16] In this judgement, Branzi shows that the success of such an affirmative perspective requires optimistic attention be paid to all aspects of place – including the seemingly negative – as indicators, directions, possibilities and opportunities, not to be corrected; but rather to be investigated, interrogated and explored. Or as Koolhaas puts it: 'even in the most degraded situations, one can find the beginning or key to something good [...] there are no situations sufficiently rotten where we cannot reach a retroactive concept.'[17]

One of the more provocative undertakings of this kind is found in Koolhaas's study of Lagos, Nigeria. In this study it is claimed that:

> *Lagos represents a developed, extreme, paradigmatic case-study of a city at the forefront of globalising modernity. This is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos.*[18]

The real value in this conclusion is not found simply in the way it could be seen to validate the urban conditions of Lagos itself; but rather, it is in the way it represents a complete reversal of process created through temporal affirmation. That is, this study operates in opposition to more typical design impulses for 'fixing', particularly when fixing means imposing an ideal; and, in so doing, it points to the way an affirmative investigation of processes can lead to potentialities that would otherwise be unimaginable. In architectural terms Lagos's architectural status is not dissimilar (albeit more extreme) to Los Angeles forty years prior, when Reyner Banham set out against accepted thought on places of architectural worth to describe the 'extraordinary mixture of geography, climate, economics, demography, mechanics and culture' that made up Los Angeles' 'four ecologies'.[19] In both examples, the real vitality of place emerges, in part because the investigator is not seeking normative aspects of a place; but rather is turning toward those things most affectual, most inscrutable, apparently trivial and belief-threatening as a means to open up new insights into how cities flourish and provide new possibilities for participation therein. Such an approach is important because Koolhaas claims 'if there is to be a "new urbanism" it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty'.[20] In other words, one cannot create urbanism; one can only help it emerge.

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A number of OMA projects demonstrate what 'staging of uncertainty' might look like: from their Parc de la Villette, where the goal was not to design a park but to design, according to Moshen Motafavi, 'a condition that would eventually generate a park'[21] to Melun-Sénart where future urban vitality was sought through a scheme of preservation, cultivation and augmentation, coming from the design of significant relationships between functions. Koolhaas is plain about the inconsequence of architectural form to the success of this project: 'it is our thesis that if the demarcation of this complex of voids and bands succeeds, ensuring qualities of beauty, serenity, history, access, and services, the city of Melun-Sénart also succeeds, whatever its architecture.'[22] A built example of such inconsequence of form can be seen at the TGV hub at Euralille. Initially called 'a disparate collection of architectural gestures, each dumbly shrieking to attract attention to its developers or owners',[23] Euralille found success not in the beauty of its individual architectural objects but in the way that, collectively, they initiated a re-investment and re-vitalisation of old Lille.[24]

Now, if the idea of staging uncertainly is generally difficult for architecture to conceive and accept, it is doubly so in an age of sustainability. Like timeless views of architectural form, sustainability is saturated with desires for eternal fixes, ones that usually over-emphasise energy efficiency and its technological resolutions.[25] Although an important aspect of sustainability, the seductive predictability (read: certainty) of energy-centric design has a tendency to obliterate other less definite concerns. For example, a recent quote in *Architecture Magazine* claimed that 'aesthetics will always be the pursuit for architects, but the net zero-energy building might be replacing the perfect corner detail as the most rewarding outcome.'[26]

Such a notion not only denigrates the material/affective function of architecture but also diverts attention away from those less predictable – but equally important – areas of sustainability such as economics, population growth, recycling and re-use, politics, community, education, and social equity. Here, temporal affirmation can be a means to attend to issues of social sustainability both ethically and opportunistically. For example, Teddy Cruz has done much to demonstrate how the design of policy and planning can create

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135514000554 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'vitality of future environments depends not just on better performing buildings but also upon our skill in designing the reagents of public support, political agency and financial solvency'

situations that support 'social choreography through time'.[27] Or, Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena has been extremely successful in manipulating economic engines of architecture to the benefit of communities; and one of his key insights for attaining architectural value has been his re-conceptualisation of social housing (object) as social investment (temporal).[28] Or, Danish architect Bjarke Ingels has used the concept of 'hedonistic sustainability' to promote sustainability as a way of life; that is, shifting sustainability from an imposed moral imperative to an integral source of joy.[29]

Within the context of sustainability, these examples point to the need to recognise that vitality of future environments depends not just on better performing buildings but also upon our skill in designing the reagents of public support, political agency and financial solvency. And, more broadly, they suggest that affirmation of the temporal dimensions of the built environment can both frame a more holistic notion of sustainability and promote urban vitality by seeking significance in the temporal processes of the life.

Futures

The time for timeless thinking has passed and, if we allow it to pass, we are better positioned for the future. Temporally attuned designers are better prepared to respond to, and build from, the changing potentialities inherent in any given situation. Working from such a position allows one to see architecture to be more than just buildings and thus champion the ecologies of particular places in their vibrant complexity instead of trying to simplify, stabilise and historicise them.[30]

Ultimately, the goal of this article is not to suggest that architecture should be diagrammatic, self-forming, disturbing or aesthetically unfamiliar; or to imply that form is inconsequential. Rather, it is to suggest that buildings have always been products of their time, place and the forces therein; and that it is an attunement to the processes that facilitates the mutual informing of place and building that result in the images of architecture that we often find compelling. It is this understanding that must be recovered and carried forward in the concern for not just the objects of human habitation but, rather, the activities and processes that support and constitute habitation.

Randall Teal is a writer, teacher, painter and designer. His pedagogical and research interests are in design fundamentals and architectural theory with significant influences from Continental thought. His writing focuses primarily on understanding and promoting situated dialogue between creative processes and the built environment.

Notes

1. Quoted in Rem Koolhaas, 'Singapore Songlines', in *S,M,L,XL: Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large,* ed. by Rem Koolhaas et al. (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998), (p. 1044).
2. See: Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 17–79.
3. Rem Koolhaas, 'Architecture Biennale – OMA Office for Metropolitan Architecture (Now Interviews)' (2010).
4. Andrea Branzi, 'Introduction: For a Non-Figurative Architecture', in *Weak and Diffuse Modernity: The World of Projects at the Beginning of the 21st Century,* (Milan: Skira, 2006), p. 9.
5. Ibid.
6. Paul Simon, 'Kodachrome' on *There Goes Rhymin' Simon* (New York: Columbia Records, 1973).
7. Rem Koolhaas, 'Junkspace', *October,* 100 (2002), 176.
8. For example, Hal Foster arrives at just this conclusion saying that 'Junkspace' is Koolhaas's coming 'to revile the vapid non-architected spaces that have come to fill so many mega-structures today – schemes he once appeared to advocate'.
9. Antonio Negri, 'On Rem Koolhaas', *Radical Philosophy,* March/April (2009).
10. A. Krista Sykes; K. Michael Hay (2006-04-30), 'Constructing a New Agenda: Architectural Theory 1993–2009' (Kindle Locations 3873–4), Chronicle Books, Kindle edition.
11. Ian Buruma, 'The Sky's the Limit', in *Considering Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture: What Is OMA,* ed. by Rem Koolhaas and Véronique Patteeuw (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2003), p. 65.
12. Okwui Enwezor, 'Terminal Modernity: Rem Koolhaas's Discourse on Entropy', in *Considering Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture: What Is OMA,* ed. by Rem Koolhaas and Véronique Patteeuw (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2003), p. 116.
13. See: Mohsen Mostafavi and Gareth Doherty, 'Ecological Urbanism' (Baden: Lars Müller, 2009). Charles Waldheim, *The Landscape Urbanism Reader* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006).
14. See for example: Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider and Jeremy Till, *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).
15. NPR, 'Stephen Colbert: In Good "Company" on Broadway', in *Fresh*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135514000554 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Air, ed. by Terry Gross (2011).
16. Branzi, p. 132.
17. Jacques Lucan, 'The Architect of Modern Life', in *OMA-Rem Koolhaas: Architecture 1970-1990,* ed. by Jacques Lucan (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991), pp. 33–41 (p. 34).
18. Rem Koolhaas and Harvard Project on the City, 'Lagos', in *Mutations,* ed. by Rem Koolhaas, et al. (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000), pp. 1239–64.
19. Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 26.
20. Rem Koolhaas, 'Whatever Happened to Urbanism?', *Design Quarterly* (1995), 29.
21. Mohsen Mostafavi, 'Why Ecological Urbanism? Why Now?', in *Ecological Urbanism,* ed. by Mohsen Mostafavi and Gareth Doherty (Baden: Lars Müller, 2009), p. 28.
22. Rem Koolhaas, 'Urbanism after Innocence: Four Projects', *Assemblage,* August (1992), 87.
23. 'Bigness is one of the greatest problems of contemporary architecture. While programmes have become larger and larger, architectural imagination has scarcely grown to reply to them,' Peter Davey, 'Comment', *The Architectural Review*, August (2002).
24. Buruma, 'The Sky's the Limit', p. 71.
25. Kiel Moe even argues that the energy focus itself, which generally follows an equilibrium view of energy systems, could be more robust if one were to allow the instabilities and unpredictabilities of energy flows and formations to become more effectual. Kiel Moe, *Convergence: An Architectural Agenda for Energy* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
26. 'Artist Walter De Maria, who died last month at the age of 77, leaves us with powerful lessons about the virtues of hard-won simplicity.' Ned Cramer, 'The Best Teacher I Never Met', available online: <http://www.architectmagazine.com/sustainability/the-best-teacher-i-never-met.aspx> (accessed 13.09.13).
27. Andres Lepik, 'Casa Familiar: Living Rooms at the Border and Senior Housing with Childcare', in *Small Scale Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement* (New York: MoMA, 2010).
28. His 2001 social housing project, Elemental Iquique, provided housing for ninety-three families who had been squatting on the building site for thirty years. With a budget of only $7500 per family, he designed the overall relationships for the complex and built an infrastructural framework but left open to the families the opportunity to extend, intervene, adapt or modify their dwelling spaces over time. Ultimately, 'people were able to double the square meters of their initial homes (36 square meters) for only $1,000 each. Five years later, any house in the Elemental Iquique project is now valued at over $20,000.' Here, the perception of social housing is transformed, not through image manipulation, but through the real effects of sustained community action and engagement. Alejandro Aravena Architect, 'Works', available online: <http://alejandroaravena.com/obras/vivienda-housing/elemental> (accessed 31.07.14).
29. Lars Eriksen, 'Bjarke Ingels Designs Incinerator That Doubles as Ski Slope in Copenhagen' (2011).
30. For example, 'AMO/OMA in Rotterdam, George Yu Architects in Los Angeles, Lang Wilson PAC in Vancouver, and SHoP in New York City, specialise in design intelligence that extends from branding and marketing consulting to product and building design. Other, less formally inclined offices like MAX.1 and Crimson, also from Rotterdam, focus on the development of what they call "orgware," the organisational intelligence that negotiates between the software of policy directives, zoning and legal codes, and building or infrastructural hardware.' Sykes and Hays, *Constructing a New Agenda: Architectural Theory 1993–2009*.

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