

FORUM

Beyond Modernism: The Prospects of Amodernism

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NEW CONCEPTS, NEW ETHICS, new aesthetics in architecture and urban planning – are we on the threshold of a discontinuity?

Dès qu'il est saisi par l'écriture, le concept est cuit¹
Jacques Derrida

A breaking point?

This text is a preliminary sketch or synopsis for an investigation to be conducted during 1995 on new currents in conceptual thinking about residential architecture and urban planning.

Based on the program for the Århus seminars, which calls for new paradigms, I have ventured to present the concept of *amodernism* as a conceptual tool. It could be used to clarify some obvious and definite differences in the conception of architecture and planning issues between past eras and this, the dawning of an amodern era.

If there is a distinct discontinuity, a distinctive new paradigm of modern thinking, as French philosopher Jacques Derrida seems to believe, in relation to the formulation of the modern project since René Descartes, let us then tentatively call this a-modern: *not* mo-

dern, not *post-* nor *pre-*, but basically non-modern, thus *a-modern*.

What then are the main characteristics of an *amodern age*?

I believe that one important dimension is related to the age of *immaterialism*: is architecture still architecture when it moves beyond its historic material basis, and when its fundamental relation to place is questioned?

Another is related to a new critical conception of architecture and planning as historically conceived on the founding principle of order and thus related to the exertion of power over others, symbolically and structurally. Is an *amodern* architecture and city structure based instead on the principle of labyrinthine manifold and stochastic, situational events possible?

A third characteristic is related to the idea of freedom and authentic liberation of the subject in a more profound sense than ever before: individual and societal desires, of the one and of the many, manifested in architectural reflections of city life. Are we, as architects, prepared to accept a socially relativistic conception of aesthetic values in place of our deep

universal conception of beauty? Or has this conception of our relation to the Other produced a new understanding, a whole new concept of Beauty and Truth in art?

Technically, this last aspect is related to the confrontation between the principles of individual and collective freedom. Liberty in architectural expression conflicts with the structural order in the city necessary to a collective subject. Here we need a better definition of how the architecture of the city can contribute to the actual realisation of different life projects which are at times in overt cultural conflict with one another.

Aspect: Immaterial

Johan Otto van Spreckelsen included vaguely in his winning design entry for Tête Défense in Paris a minaret about three times the height of the Grande Arche itself. This building may soon be erected next to Spreckelsen's monumental office building. French architect Jean Nouvel won the competition for the tower with a skyscraper of colossal dimensions – over 400 meters high – called *la Tour sans fin*: the tower with no limit, no end, the limitless tower, or perhaps the tower for no purpose... . Meanwhile Japanese builders are actually seriously considering a building over 1000 meters in height.

The urge for an immaterial architecture forced Nouvel to conceive the tower as a symbolic projection of the history of architecture itself: growing from its material foundations below the earth's surface towards an immaterial future. Therefore the building grows gradually less material and more immaterial in appearance for each of the more than 100 stories up to the top. At the top, the extremely light glass building structure is to vanish into the sky among the clouds. Solid architecture virtually dissolves into the air; basic assumptions are overthrown. Could there be a stronger symbolic projection of the possible future of architecture in an age of immaterialism?

The same expression is displayed in a somewhat less dramatic way in the newly built Lyon

Opera, also by Jean Nouvel, but is demonstrated most accurately in the new glass building for Cartier SA in the centre of Paris. This symbolic projection of immaterial architecture, or the expression of the aesthetics of virtual disappearance² through several layers of glass curtains, is especially astonishing in its historic context along a traditional Parisian boulevard.

The current obsession with the 100% glass façade wall supported only by light steel structures and even with flat glass roofs with an inclination of only 1°, the building as a total window to the world, the walls vanishing altogether, produces an architecture of glass prisms where the distinction between inside and outside is truly dissolved. Such work in recent projects (one probably not to be built, the other near completion) by architects Soler and Perreault in Paris is another demonstration of immaterial metaphors in contemporary architecture.³ An important point of reference in all these projects is the legendary *Maison de Verre* of Pierre Chareau, built in Paris 1928–32. Yet another is OMA and Rem Koolhaas' winning entry for a new library in Jussieu, Paris. In this case the architect is perhaps more concerned with the idea of dissolving conventional interior spatial structures in all dimensions for a new, floating conception of space. Is this modernism's concept of continuous, limitless free space finally made technically realistic? This is an urge inherited from the classics of the modern movement, especially from Mies van der Rohe. It fulfills the original heroic project of making architecture disappear with new and better adapted technologies concentrated on the promise of glass as the construction material of the future *par préférence*. The new "intelligent" or "chameleon" glass developed by Pechiney/St Gobain presents enormous possibilities for interiors as well as exteriors.⁴

The age of immaterialism is principally dominated by the dramatic and revolutionary change in our perception of space, time and place. From its original unity and profound stability we now move mentally – continuously

and constantly – from one space-time occasion to another through technical simulation. We virtually experience several space-time occasions simultaneously, broadening our total experience of the world and its history considerably. We establish new tele-topological relations with other people in addition to our traditional topologically dependent relations. A major scientific and philosophical investigation in this field is Michel Serres' analysis of the topological revolution in this amodern age, the confusion of our familiar concept of linear time and space unity.⁵ The political *salon* of the 19th Century as a public space or forum for political discussions has been replaced by the electronic square, notice board or electronic salon, sometimes the medium for obscure and dubious thoughts with anonymity preserved, like the 17th Century carnival. Our basic conception of space, time and place – of reality – is still there, of course, but it is now complemented with electronically simulated *arealities*, which take their due share in our total conception of a new amodern reality. Real space-time is confronted with irreal space-time.

Architecture has to take this new amodern definition of place and time into account. It has to bring architecture far beyond limited metaphorical representation of the immaterial age as Le Corbusier did with the machine age and conceive a new concept of amodern space-time. Is the traditional sense of place an archaic relic or does it still play a fundamental role in our lives? Immaterial architecture is, in some respects, a neo-modern revival. At worst it reproduces rationalist ideas of a post-human architecture, an architecture for androids, and at best takes up lost but fruitful modernist concepts like socio-spatial enfranchisement. What about the immaterial city? What consequences can we foresee for city structures? Perhaps the tyranny of place has finally been overcome: first by the automobile, then by the electronic travelling device or telematic vehicle we may soon possess in our homes. The immaterial revolution produces the opposite of

functional differentiation because from now on virtually anything can be done in any space-time conjuncture. The long-awaited simultaneity and carnivalistic spontaneity of the free city of multitude and infinite occasions, once so imaginatively conceived by the philosopher of the modern urban age Henri Lefebvre, is perhaps at last in sight. These are the contours of the city of creative desires instead of the city of productive need.

Structure: Labyrinthine, manifold

On the structural level, modernism can either be conceived as pure and formal, geometrical, militaristic order or the total disorder of urban chaos. The deconstructivist period has recently worshipped chaos as a metaphor for aesthetic and radical disobedience, just as post-modernism once celebrated formerly denied historical references. Amodernism in turn favours a new structural reference: the labyrinth of manifold, something between chaos and order, the two basic forms of capitalistic and state capitalistic order.⁶

According to Henri Gaudin, French architect and architectural philosopher, until the Renaissance, society's incidental, accidental space provided the basis for a socially and practically well-grounded architecture and city structure.⁷ Viollet-le-Duc betrayed and concealed these origins and attempted the geometrical purification of medieval and pre-renaissance architecture, which he regarded as mentally retarded and unfulfilled. Labyrinthine manifold and uncertainty is perhaps the symbol of the immaterial mode of production, the new Middle Ages. Orthogonal, Euclidean order and nihilistic chaos represent the blunt order of someone else and the ghostlike disorder of just anyone else. Both structures can be equally destructive to the human mind in any attempt to bring meaning and identity to existence. The labyrinth hides its meaning, though this meaning can be detected and revealed through its thread of Ariadne – its somewhat hidden reason.

The labyrinth is also the symbol of a new philosophical standpoint. Absolute truth is no longer available nor universally valid. This amodern insight only means we must constantly continue and intensify the nomadic search for truth from one position to another in the labyrinths of thought and reason, according to Jacques Derrida. As we move on, each new position reveals the relative nature of our former position, constantly deconstructing the false assumptions of yesterday only to construct new fragile ones. Amodernism in philosophy has perhaps for the first time established the premise that uncertainty will prevail and that the impossibility of ever reaching firm ground should itself be the starting point for any investigation of knowledge.

Here may be the place for discussing the foundations of a search for a new aesthetic principle, for a repositioning of the role of art in society. The aesthetics or the beauty of the ugly, *dirty realism* or the somewhat related concept of *baroquisme*⁸, invokes the new spirit of amodernism, the social and cultural relativity of aesthetics and the disbelief in universal laws of beauty and proportion in architecture and planning. This principle is certainly related to the organic architecture and the aperspective space principles developed by modernist architects like Hans Scharoun or Gunnar Asplund. Asplund reveals in some ways a deconstructivist attitude in Gothenburg's Law Court extension and reorganisation in the late thirties, simultaneously respecting existing architectural paradigms and vigorously and radically defiguring them with humour and dexterity. We might here go back to the origins of a more poetic modernism, a search for undetermined, non-Euclidean geometry, and see its relation to the contextual modernism of the 1990s in works by Jean Nouvel and Architecture Studio in France.

Subject:

Free plan, free space, free expression

Personally, I am somewhat at a loss concerning urban issues as I have departed from an overall

conception of the conditions of spatial production for a more elaborate theory of how architecture at an everyday level can contribute to social qualities and mental or existential liberation for the individual as well as for society. Of course there are major distinctions to be made between the spatial analysis of a flat and that of a city, but structural rules related to human activities apply in both cases equally. I see a continuous spectrum ranging from the habitat, through common ground, to the street and the public place. From an initial situation of openness and generality, sometimes also naturally labyrinthine in character and structure, the habitat as well as the city has been functionalised, structured according to specific needs in the mode of production, *differentiation* being the principle common trend.

Amodernism has inverted this trend in both areas: *either* in a direction of new general open spaces for the many, undefined and multi-layered purposes intermingled at the same time; *or* in a more mystical labyrinthine development no longer disfunctional and counterproductive in relation to the mode of production as once conceived from a political or ideological standpoint.

I have thus been seeking the *degré zero* or common denominator of architecture in the creation of social meaning. I believe we need a good understanding of the significance of architecture on this level in order to elaborate a more generally valid theory for far more complex levels of planning. How can the city be a social project in the same way as the building has proven to be in some adventurous experimental cases since 1968? In other words how can the social structure of the whole city be built up by small-scale local anarchies? How will the experiences of such events contribute to a more general and active participation on the urban level?

Most importantly, how do we construct planning tools able to cope with the inevitable search for authentic architectural expression

relative to individuals and group-subjects? How can the realisation of freedom, the inevitable continuing resurrection of the individual, be reconciled with basic economic and practical restraints? Is it as simple as defining clear limits and rules of syntax on the one hand and rendering as much freedom as possible within these definite limits on the other? Beautiful city structures have apparently been built that way. Social contradictions have been structured this way thereby structuring space in a pattern of an accidental social logic, contributing to an intricate spatial pattern, with a richness and depth of possible interpretation. Recent analyses of medieval cities reveal the immense diversity of conditions and circumstances which nevertheless produce a common spatial poetry in structure. The architecture of the city is profoundly a social art. City structure can be perceived as a manifestation of social authenticity, of emancipation, of aesthetic and ethical liberation during the constantly renewed questioning of the reason and logic behind city development.

Central to the amodern paradigm is the concept, originating in the philosophy of Lévinas and restructured by Derrida, of respect for the Other, for Alterity, *l'altérité*. Respect for cultural diversity, for the generalised and specific other, seems to be the ethical basis for an amodern conception of our time. This ability to see the world from several different viewpoints at the same time underlies the ethics of amodern contextuality: the *subjects* of architecture are firmly established in time and space, as the subject of place, the social subject, and the historical subject, whereas modernism at worst saw nothing but a *tabula rasa* and a geometrically central point in space as the abstract subject of architecture.

The tendency towards de-spatialisation of structures of power is also an important precondition for amodernism. There are definitely new and tremendously powerful means for social intervention today which are less related to space and physical structure than pre-

viously. The relative autonomy in architectural ideas and planning schemes is thus widening, the city of desires not being as dangerous as it was – not long ago – when revolution lurked around the corner. Those archaic means of intervention related to physical structures seem more and more obsolete in a virtually immaterial society in which images, information and communicative acts are transported on the new electronic highways, in the same way as movements of capital are liberated from all restrictions while crossing national borders.

Empowerment through architecture

In this context I'd also like to add some conclusions arrived at in a recently published analysis of the evolution of social housing. This study is called *Befriande Arkitektur*⁹, in English *Empowerment through Architecture: Contemporary Architecture and Social Evolution in a Western European Context*. At the end of this text I will present some explorative ideas for further evolution in this field that I plan to develop in future research.

The basic theme of this research is the dichotomy of architecture of freedom or architecture of control – as I see it, the tragic dilemma of modernism. The study outlines a basic interpretative scheme for the development of social architecture in modern times: the instigation of the architecture of authentic desires versus the architecture of symbolic imprisonment as the essential dilemma of modernism in housing since the 1920s. These events are regarded as a major reflection of contradictions in the rationalisation of the emerging welfare state and results in a critique of the modernist concept of housing.

The basic empirical element is the documentation of about twenty years of evolution in alternative and experimental social housing projects and architectural ventures throughout Scandinavia and the European continent during the period 1970–1990. About a hundred significant projects displaying different aspects of social change materialised in archi-

tectural practice are presented in photographs, plans or illustrations. These documents have been compiled in – and can easily be qualitatively displayed on and retrieved from – an image computer database system called *Archives of New Architecture*, ANA, developed at Chalmers School of Architecture in a Windows and PC environment.

The book contains a main essay entitled *Empowerment through Architecture*. This essay is supported by parallel documentation of realised housing projects, chronologically arranged, along with other shorter articles by the same author. Added to these texts are articles written by architects and researchers from several countries. The idea is to promote interpretations of architecture by relating a basically philosophical text to qualitative photographic representations of architecture.

The essay opens up with a discussion of fundamental issues on the history of 18th and 19th Century social housing, mainly based on recent French theoretical research by Monique Eleb-Vidal, Henri Raymond and Michel Conan.¹⁰ These points of departure form the basic frame for the formulation of a new perspective on housing in our own time. The sometimes conflicting main themes for the social housing of tomorrow are identified as Sound, Sensual and Super-technological.

The theoretical part deals with the concepts of Need, Desire and Beauty in the social meaning and significance of architecture. The prospect of an *authentic architecture* forms the normative point of focus.

The aim of this work is especially to encourage reflections upon on the one hand the emancipatory capacity of architecture – the capacity for a creative authenticity in user-related architectural planning – and on the other hand the devastating capacity of architecture to captivate mind *and* body, as a tool which may be used to make people – *through architecture* – conform to ideas and ways of life in accordance with specific political or cultural intentions. The latter theme has been deve-

loped by the author in a work on the origins of social housing in France and in Europe in general, *Fängslände Arkitektur* (1987). The former theme was the subject of a dissertation in 1984 entitled *Boendegemenskap*, a study of experimental self-reliant communal living projects in Europe. The present work attempts to summarize a long period of work in this field around two contrasting poles of interest: desire and power in architecture.

The French concept of *dispositifs*, of the *socio-architectural type* as the dialectic relation between an architectural space-symbol and social structure, is key to fully understand as well as to identify crucial points of transformation in the constant process of architectural crystallisation of social praxis.

The conditional habitat: new perspectives

Finally, important current, future themes in the evolution of housing which could be discussed in conjunction with the above concept of amodernism are briefly outlined below.

First, we see new conceptions of *intimate relations* manifested by, for example, the innovative tendency in modern housing to open up the interior of a flat in all dimensions. That is to say that the hygienic and disciplinary project of social modernism of the 19th Century in working class housing, in which control of visual, verbal and physical contact – promiscuity in its widest possible sense – within the enlarged family and between members of different families in the same multi-storey house was such an important issue, is considerably reversed. This point is interestingly and provocatively demonstrated by innovative flats in Egebjerggard, Ballerup, with their extreme openness and unconventional plan layout with the exposed toilet in the middle of a 16m² bathroom, thus stretching degrees of possible intimacy to the extreme in our contemporary cultural context.

Second, *new space-time conceptions* figure here, the place of habitat being defined dif-

ferently on a conceptual level but also in relation to new technological achievements which virtually reduce certain physical distances. The most practical implication is that more work, and particularly office work, will be done at home, thus revitalising domestic areas.

Third, the ecological imperative or the *concept of sustainability* is another important point that already has had, and will certainly continue to have, considerable impact on the design of housing projects in the future.

The perception of aesthetics is a fourth point concerning the above mentioned *relative perception of beauty* related to the social subject of architecture.

A final point is the *fragmentation of life-worlds* and the dichotomy between two contradictory attitudes, also separated by their differing perceptions of velocity of time and the relation to physical space. We have, on the one hand, the ecologically sound, *traditional and hedonistic* communitarian lifestyle, and on the other the new *super-technological urban-nomads*, modern nomads who are liberated from certain spatial boundaries due to advances in communication technology – the end of the tyranny of place. Several recent studies recently reveal this major division in predo-

minant lifestyles from different perspectives.¹¹

In conclusion, if Le Corbusier saw the prospect of freedom through order, *liberté par l'ordre*, a modernism sees freedom as the realisation of a multitude of parallel orders beyond any concept of order related to necessity or need, the labyrinthine manifestation of the authentic desires of each and every subject. This last theme is perhaps the most important in the long run in the current evolution of social housing, bearing in mind its quite contradictory historical origins.

I am rich. I contain multitudes.
Walt Whitman



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Referenser

1. ... the moment it is captured in writing, the concept is born ...
2. For a conceptual reference, see Virilio, Paul, 1989, *Esthétique de la disparition*.
3. Quai de Branly and Bibliothèque Nationale de France, respectively.
4. For an interesting discussion, see Cancelieri, Anne, 1992, *l'Habitat du futur*.
5. Serres, Michel, 1993, *Les Origines de la Géométrie*.
6. This symbolic figure seems to be most relevant in the architectural thinking of Daniel Libeskind. In a lecture in Copenhagen, spring, 1994, he referred to writings of Paul Valéry, *Enpalinos ou l'Architecte*, 1921, in this context. See Daniel Libeskind, 1994, *Daniel Libeskind: radix-matrix Architekturen und Schriften*.
7. See for a basic reference Henri Gaudin, *La Cabane et le labyrinthe*, 1984.
8. For this concept see Le Dantec, Jean-Pierre 1992, *Dédale le Héros*.
9. Gromark, Sten, *Befriande Arkitektur*, 1993, Chalmers School of Architecture.
10. Eleb-Vidal, M. & A. Debarre-Blanchard, *Architectures de la vie privée*. 1989, Raymond, Henri, *l'Architecture, les Aventures Spatiales de la Raison*, 1984, among several other works Conan, Michel *Concevoir un projet d'architecture*, 1991.
11. One interesting analysis is Amphoux, Pascal, "l'Habitat Conditionnel", in *Lifestyles Housing Architecture/EUROPAN* 1989 pp. 70–73.