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The Work of Architecture in the Age of Commodification

by Kenneth Frampton

Editor's note: This essay is the introduction to *Commodification and Spectacle in Architecture: A Harvard Design Magazine Reader*, the first of a series of HDM Readers forthcoming from the University of Minnesota Press.

Essays included are:

- *Spectacle and its Discontents Or, the Elusive Joys of Architainment*
— by Luis Fernández-Galiano
- *Less for Less Yet: On Architecture's Value(s) in the Marketplace*
— by Michael Benedikt
- *Brand Aid, Or, The Lexus and the Guggenheim (Further Tales of the Notorious B.I.G.ness)*
— by Michael Sorkin
- *Hyphenation Nation: Blurred Forms for a Blurred World*
— by Rick Poynor
- *Architecture for Sale(s): An Unabashed Apologia*
— by Kevin Ervin Kelley
- *Rocking for the Clampdown: Creativity, Corporations, and the Crazy Curvilinear Cacophony of the Experience Music Project*
— by Thomas Frank
- *Rockbottom: Villa by OMA*
— by Wouter Vanstiphout
- *Inside the Blue Whale: A Day at the Bluewater Mall*
— by Rick Poynor
- *We Dig Graves — All Sizes*
— by Daniel Naegele
- *The Second Greatest Generation*
— by Michael Sorkin

Over the past three decades, international monopoly capital has increasingly challenged the authority of the nation-state, which still ostensibly embodies the democratic precepts of the free world. In this weakening of sovereignty, dating back to the revocation of the postwar Bretton Woods agreement, we have reason to believe that the last politically independent nation-state will be France, for France remains a state where the public

intellectual plays a part in the country's political life. It is this perhaps that accounts for the apocalyptic tone of French sociopolitical analysis. I have in mind the long haul that runs from Henri Lefebvre's *The Survival of Capitalism* (1973) to Michel Houellebecq's recent dystopic vision of a society of "isolated individuals pursuing independent aims of mutual indifference" as paraphrased by Luis Fernández-Galiano in his essay, "Spectacle and its Discontents or the Elusive Joys of Architainment." I open with the theme of the public intellectual because with the exceptions of Galiano, Thomas Frank, Rick Poynor, and Michael Sorkin, most of the authors represented in this anthology tend to evade the psycho-political substrate underlying the compulsions of our commodified society. It is as though they would prefer to avoid a critical confrontation with socioeco-

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conomic causes that are directly responsible for the environmental degradation of the late modern world.

Despite over half a century of psycho-sociological research, the formation of identity at both an individual and a group level, along with the artificial stimulation of desire, jointly remain among the more opaque aspects of Anglo-American culture, particularly in view of the disturbing fact that in the 2000 presidential election less than half of eligible U.S. voters actually voted and that a large number of those that did vote then and in 2004 gave their support to candidates whose policies run counter to their class interests. While hints of this depoliticized malaise are latent in almost every contribution to this volume, there is nonetheless a tendency to avoid any reference to the benighted socialist alternative, as though this political option is so discredited by history and the triumph of the market as to be irrelevant.

This is at once evident in Michael Benedikt's essay "Less for Less Yet," which affords the reader a rigorous analysis of some of the aporia surrounding the profession, beginning with the wholesale commodification of the environment, although Benedikt elects to shift the blame for this regrettable condition to the supposedly self-inflected marginality of the architectural profession, which, as is commonly known, is responsible for the design of only 2% of the annual built production, rather than to accord some of this responsibility to the manipulated consensus politics of the two-party system, locked in a perennial struggle to gain the decisive 5% of the vote that will ease one party or the other into power — that is to say, politics for the sake of getting elected as opposed to a politic dedicated to the welfare of the society. Benedikt's skepticism renders him only too ready to accept the populist adage that people vote with their wallets instead of their ballots, provided that they are fortunate enough to have sufficient disposable income. Thus we are informed, in Benedikt's exceptionally trenchant manner,

In societies at peace that can maintain free markets, people can get what

they want; what they want depends on how successfully their needs and values are addressed by competing producers. With a modicum of prosperity, people have choices. This is the context in which architecture, as an industry, broadly conceived, has become less and less able to deliver a superior evolving and popularly engaging product that can compete with other more successful products — with cars, movies, sports and travel, to name a few. And the less successfully architecture has competed with these diverse "growth industries," the less architects have been entrusted with time and money to perform work on a scale and with a quality that could perhaps turn things around.

While one may readily share Benedikt's critique of the irrelevance of elitist aestheticism and his parallel impatience with the reductive maximization of digital design and with the more arcane aspects of contemporary architectural theory, one can hardly be sanguine about his economic determinism rendered exclusively in terms of populist market forces. It is somehow unconscionable, given his realistic stance, that he has nothing to say about the not-so-benign neglect of public transport in the United States or about the concomitant barely hidden subsidization of the automobile through various stratagems, from the federally subsidized interstate system to the proliferation of urban sprawl first, in the postwar era, through the FHA mortgage regulations and subsequently through the combination of land-use ordinances and local building codes, both of which have paradoxically encouraged the continual subdivision of agricultural land. As architect turned "free-marketer," Benedikt seemingly would prefer not to concern himself with such phenomena as the still-expanding urbanized regions of the United States that so far planners have been unable to check due to the stranglehold that private land-holding interests exercise over contemporary development. It says something for the "newspeak" of our time that Benedikt feels that he may legitimately refer to architecture as an in-

dustry as opposed to a liberal profession. His thesis is that architecture could be restructured as a "growth industry" and thereby respond to the popular taste of the free market, although what he has in mind when he speaks of being able "to turn things around" is far from clear.

One is inclined to be more sympathetic to the critical tone of the Benedikt contribution than to the letter of its populist rhetoric, for if there is one thing that perennially escapes our professional attention — above all the attention of contemporary architectural educators — it is the need to devise a sustainable and simultaneously socially accessible middle-class land settlement pattern for future residential development. Since Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander's *Community and Privacy* (1963), hardly anyone in the field has bothered to scratch the surface of this problem, and yet, at many levels, it remains the most fundamental environmental challenge of our time.

It would be hard to find a more passionate advocate of design marketing than Kevin Erwin Kelley, who, in his worldly essay "Architecture for Sale(s)," boldly demonstrates how this may be best achieved as a comprehensive service by suppressing the term *architecture* altogether.

Calling what our firm does "architecture" has been quite confusing for all involved, so we redefined our services as "Perception Design" — we help prompt consumers to buy through environmental "signaling" that influences their perceptions. In a sense, we are designing the consumers themselves. Brand cueing takes place not only in built elements, but also in the menu, uniforms, logo, aromas, music, sensations, and, most important, emotions. Most architects are surprised that our firm generally won't take on a project unless we are involved in evaluating all elements of the brand. We changed the firm's name to the single word *Shook* with the tag line "It's All Consuming." We thereby tell people that we eagerly embrace consumerism.

Although Peter Behrens was one of the world's first "house designers" when he became the architect to the AEG corporation in 1908, he would have hardly understood the demagogic ephemeral nature of *branding* in today's terms. At the turn of the century, Behrens could still entertain the illusion that he was determining the overall quality of a new industrial civilization, whereas today's brand designers are not only dedicated to the gratification of consumer taste but also to the stimulation of desire, knowing full well that everything depends on the sublimating eroticism of consumption as opposed to the intrinsic quality of the thing consumed. As Kelley puts it: "People *enjoy* the experience of buying, sometimes more than having the products themselves, because the moment of buying is one of enthusiastic fantasy and escape."

Nothing could be further from Kelley's Candide-like euphoria than Michael Sorkin's essay "Brand Aid" through which, as with several other essays in this book, the figure of Rem Koolhaas stalks like a cultural shade. Sorkin is hyper-aware of this ideological nemesis at every step, above all in his sardonic assessment of the 1998 Guggenheim motorcycle show, sponsored by BMW and designed by Frank Gehry, of which he writes:

The match of Rem and Krens — the two tall men with flat affects — is a great one: both are selling the same product: products. "Shopping is arguably the last remaining form of public activity," opines Koolhaas. And so we shop for Picassos and Kandinskys, for Harleys and Yamahas, for Prada shoes and Bulgari brooches, all under the aura of covetable pots of gold at the end of fleeting rainbows glistening about the roulette tables and the high-stakes slots. Just as the way out of the museum leads through the shop, the exit from the casino is lined with boutiques and museums. At the motorcycle exhibition, the stairway is painted in Prada's signature chartreuse to reinforce the point. The retina is the point of sale: to see

is to buy. In contemporary "casino capitalism," citizenship is a credit line, democracy is a crapshoot.

For very different reasons, Sorkin follows Kelley and the versatile critic Thomas Frank in recognizing that ultimately the brand is not something fixed like a universal logo, but rather something elusive, such as a mood or a desire, in a constant state of evocative formulation. As Frank puts it, quoting a British pamphlet introducing account planning: "Advertising is a means of contributing meaning and values that are necessary and useful to people in structuring their lives, their casual relationships, and their rituals." However, Frank's somewhat ambivalent assessment of the role of advertising in relation to democracy is quite removed from Kelley's enthusiastic acclaim of branding as a means of conferring upon a political candidate the deceptive aura of *trust* that will help to ensure his or her election.

Sorkin touches on similar disconcerting convergences when he remarks on the parallel, paradoxical interdependence between late capitalism and contemporary art and on the way in which this mutual dependency possesses equally sobering ramifications for architecture. Thus we read:

Just as Koolhaas promotes his own brand with a blizzard of statistics, photos of the "real" world, and a weary sense of globalism's inescapable surfeit and waste as the only legitimate field of architectural action, the New Urbanists — with their own megalomaniac formulas of uniformity — create slightly "different" Vegas of "traditional" architecture based on its association with the imagined reality of bygone happiness. Their tunes may differ, but both are lyricists for the ideological master narrative that validates and celebrates the imperial machine.

From which we may understand that in different ways architecture has become a brand in itself, particularly for the "signature" architect, whose mediatic overvalu-

ation finds a direct correspondence in the systematic undervaluation of other equally if not more talented architects whose work has yet to be confirmed by the mediatic consensus as a discernable and desirable brand.

Sorkin is at pains to point out that the brand syndrome also operates at another more surreptitious level than the upfront mediatic promotion of star architects. This is the implicit corporate brand whereby, copying the acronymic formulation of SOM, architectural offices assert their corporate status by adopting logo-like initials such as KPF, HOK, NBBJ, and even OMA, with which Koolhaas has promoted his own international operation. In this subliminal sleight of hand, the delirious neo-avant-garde enlarges its scope through assuming the aura of corporate power.

Koolhaas's ambivalence about the value of architecture in the late modern world has been rarely so forcefully characterized as in Wouter Vastiphout's dichotomous appraisal of the chasm that divides Koolhaas's dystopic diagnosis from his programmatic, cinematically indulgent practice as an architect. Thus while being only too appreciative of Koolhaas's spectacular house for a paraplegic publisher near Bordeaux, complete with its extra-large hydraulic elevator, Vastiphout loses his patience with Rem's invidious comparisons between the hyper-production of China's building industry and the diminutive output of contemporary occidental architects. He vents his spleen with Rem's ambivalent public posture with a rhetorical question: "Why does he sardonically state that in China architects produce ten times as much, ten times as fast and do it ten times as cheaply as their European counterparts and therefore can be said to be a thousand times as good, and say this at the opening of an exhibition of projects that have taken an ungodly amount of design time, for small fees, only to make something desperately unique, utterly authentic, personal, and seriously Architectural?"

In "Hyphenation Nation," Rick Poynor draws our attention to the received contemporary wisdom that *hybrid-*

ity is the inescapable destiny of postmodern environmental culture, from the works of charismatic star architects to the processes of multi-national, corporate design practices. Inspired by the socioeconomic prognostications of the Swedish business gurus Jonas Ridderstråle and Kjell Nordström, Poyner argues that maximization of profit in contemporary society depends upon a categorical departure from any kind of traditional division of labor, be this in commerce, education or many other diverse undertakings. By their endorsement of such expressions as *infotainment*, *distance learning*, *bio-tech*, and *corporate university* — all of which are symptomatic of what these hipster Swedes call new wealth-generating bundles — one comes to realize that Galiano's coinage of the term *architainment* is only too prescient. Beyond being merely an acerbic comment, this term is the touchstone of a new way of "making it," as Will Alsop's brashly irresponsible, yet highly successful practice surely serves to confirm.

The fact is that, as Poyner remarks, the arts of visual communication, as opposed to architecture, have long since been co-opted by the admissives of the advertising industry that from its inception has harnessed graphic and filmic expression to its own rhetorical ends as we may appreciate from the work of such a renowned pioneering graphist as Lucien Bernhard, not to mention the more comprehensive hybrid practices of our own time such as Bruce Mau's "Life Style" in his celebrated book of that title, wherein he searches somewhat diffidently for an exit from the closed consumerist circuit of our time, or of the late Tibor Kalman, who worked for Benetton while naively believing that one could still "find the cracks in the wall" through which one could escape from the consumerist dead-end of international monopoly capital. Not since the welfare state socialism of the interwar and postwar periods in the first half of the 20th century has it been possible to employ visual communication over a broad front for purposes other than advertising products.

Poyner makes us acutely aware of this by drawing attention to the by now

forty-year-old graphic design manifesto *First Things First*, reworked in the year 2000 in time for the anti-globalization protests staged at the WTO meeting in Seattle in that year. That this manifesto, drafted by socially conscious graphic designers, was rejected out of hand by the "rank and file" of the design profession is hardly surprising. A similar *rappel à l'ordre* written by a minority of politically engaged architects and addressed to the profession at large would almost certainly be equally ill received. The capacity of architects and their apologists to accept the trivialization of the field in the late modern world though the reduction of everything to representation and/or misrepresentation seems to be enthusiastically entertained by Daniel Naegele's warm appraisal of the spectacular industrial design activity of Michael Graves. Unlike the misgivings entertained by Mau and Kalman and even Koolhaas when he argues that "not shopping" is the only luxury left in the late modern world, Naegele remains totally sanguine about Graves's infantilized Disneyfication of everyday domestic objects.

Thomas Frank's essay "Rocking for the Clampdown" enters the list at this point by suggesting that there may be something more than a casual link between the tortuously innovative accounting of the New Economy and Frank Gehry's cacophonous rendering of Paul Allen's *Experience Music Project* in Seattle. He reminds us early on of Enron's patronage of the 2002 Frank Gehry retrospective at the *Guggenheim Museum* and of the fact that the foreword to the catalogue for the show was written by none other than Enron's Jeffrey Skilling at the very moment when he was already under investigation. As Skilling put it: "Enron embarks every day by questioning the conventional to change business paradigms and create new markets that will shape the New Economy. It is the shared sense of challenge that we admire most in Frank Gehry, and we hope that this exhibition will bring you as much inspiration as it has brought us."

In a remarkably subtle excursus, Frank sets forth the sociocultural-cum-economic vectors that have interacted in

the rock music industry over the last forty years to forge a surprising link between the counterculture of the '60s — embodied in the music of Jimi Hendrix — and the politically reactionary conservatism of the United States that served as the paradoxical proving ground for the new digital economy. To much the same end, Paul Allen's cybernetically contrived reenactment of rock culture depends on interactive feedback loops and simulated "play alongs" by virtue of which the visitor may vicariously reexperience the music of an epoch. All these populist, hypothetically democratic "samplings" would perhaps entail some radical conviction were it not for the fact that, as Frank unsparingly observes:

Today we know enough about Paul Allen's Microsoft to understand that temp agencies don't empower workers, that the reign of "interactivity" permitted monopolies with unprecedented power, that popular participation in stock markets allowed a concentration of wealth that we hadn't seen since the 1920s. In this sense "interactivity" was an ideological smoke screen, a democratic do-it-yourself myth that concealed the fantastic growth of autocratic corporate power.

In this context, as Frank remarks, there is an odd but symptomatic disjunction between the blue, red, and gold mirage of Gehry's exterior, supposedly representing a smashed guitar (a figure only perceivable, as Hal Foster has suggested, from the air or the top of Seattle's space needle) and the ad hoc, banged together, back-stage character of the interior. Is it possible to see this contrast as testifying to the split between the neon-lit facade of the Silicon Valley bubble and the loosely "wired" house of cards that lay just beneath its surface? Paul Allen's somewhat sardonic gesture of smashing a glass guitar at the opening of his \$240 million nostalgic folly was presumably a public reenactment of the efficacy of an orgiastic destruction as the guarantor of worldly success. As Frank proceeds to point out, this cor-

porate article of faith in hyper-innovation has become somewhat tainted of late by the inequity of insider trading, excessive stock options, and all the conveniently ingenious accounting methods that have since become a synonym for fraud.

Where is the anachronistic culture of architecture to situate itself in the face of all this digitally dematerialized representation and misrepresentation? In formulating such a rhetorical question, I am, I suppose, harking back to Frank Lloyd Wright's paradoxically creative evocation of the "cause conservative" as a hypothetically progressive principle. This is at least one way of asking the question as to what we might mean, in this fungible age, by such terms as *sustainable environmental design* or let us say even *tradition*, in as much as the finest work of any epoch always amounts to a critical reinterpretation of tradition. Of course nothing could be further from this than the maximization of innovation as an end in itself or the romantic cult of destruction and waste as a kind of latter-day capitalist potlatch. As Adolf Loos put it, with his characteristic irony, "There is no point in inventing anything unless it is an improvement." To put it more even-handedly, however: in what way may we modulate some future possible relationship between creativity and homeostasis or, let us say, between human imaginative capacity and the now all-too-evident limitations of the biosphere? This is surely the one question that the contemporary cult of the populist free-market is unable to address. By and large today's realistic critical opinion, as a number of these essays suggest, prefers to focus on the de facto consumerist gratification of engineered desire as a contemporary delirium rather than to dwell on the ongoing and pervasive corruption of democratic culture through the agency of the mass media.

How may one offset this globalized closure becomes a question not only for architectural practice but also for all the multifarious schools of architecture and urbanism. At this juncture one can hardly emphasize enough how the substance of political process needs to be articulated within the field, both pedagogically and

otherwise, not only in relation to the big politics of large-scale environmental policy, to be argued for agonistically in the public realm, but also in the small politics of psycho-social well-being and sustainability as these factors may be incorporated at a micro-scale into environmental design. On the one hand, then, political consciousness, in the broadest sense, ought to be as much part of design education as any other component in an architectural curriculum; on the other hand, it is necessary to maintain an ethical dimension in the culture of design itself. This last surely corresponds to that which Morris Berman in his book *The Twilight of American Culture* has called "the monastic option." It is this that is implicitly advanced by Poynor as a strategy by which to transcend the spectacle of neo-avant-gardist kitsch (quasi-radical in form but nihilistic in content), and through this to re-embrace the resistant capacity of critical culture.

It is a stark prospect and a difficult choice that not everyone in the design professions is equally free to make to the same degree, that is to say, the choice between going with the flow of the market or cultivating a self-conscious resistance along the lines of Ernst Bloch's projected hope, his evocation of the "not yet." Certainly living needs, as opposed to desires, demand to be met but surely not in such a way as to ruin the world for generations yet unborn. □