CITE*READING*

Hip Architecture?

Hip: The History
by John Leland, published by Ecco, 2004.
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Reviewed by Aaron Betsky

In the world of architecture, it is not hip to be hip. Or cool, or anything else that smacks of surfing on the trends and tastes of the day, pandering to mass audiences, or otherwise doing something other than building the rock of ages in as intellectually rigorous a manner as possible. As an alternative, the architect can just do her or his job, making functional structures in a cost-effective manner. Giving 'em what they want might be acceptable in certain circles, but in architecture that would only mean making conservative structures that are instantly recognizable.

The dirty, dirty secret behind all of this is the reality that, in fact, architecture *is* as subject to the whims and fancies of fashion as any other cultural endeavor, and that most of us would sorely like to be hip—and some of us even are, as architects become fashion models and culture stars.

Now there is a bible for those who secretly aspire to be hip. John Leland's *Hip: The History* gives us the genesis of the term, its evolution in American culture, and its meaning. In so doing, Leland offers an alternative to those attitudes in architecture that tend to make the discipline elitist, isolated, and rigid. Though he does not address architecture at all, preferring to focus on music and literature, Leland does provide definitions and pathways that might be useful for design disciplines. Along the way, they might actually help architecture turn from a lily white profession into something a little more open to the realities of our society's racial makeup.

For hip, as Leland is careful to point out, is a black thing. The word itself probably derives from the West African language Wolof, and means, according to Leland, "to see or have your eyes wide open." In the U.S., it became the word for slave knowledge and language, which hid behind phrases the masters could not understand. From these origins in resistance, hip evolved into something that also sheltered a set of values the reverse of those produced by the physical condi-

tions in which slaves found themselves. It proposed the open against the closed, the mutable against the fixed, and the multivalent against the clear and the concise. These values found their expression in what Leland calls "some constants: a dance between black and white; a love of the outsider; a straddle of high and low culture; a grimy sense of nobility; language that means more than it says."

As African-Americans moved into large cities, hip became the way they defined themselves. It was also profoundly urban. In the faceless city, it became a way of establishing identity, but it also infected that scene to the point that "hip is what causes creatives to move to a city, and if you're hip, you'd be there already." Hip allied itself with (or was co-opted by) advertising, which preserved what to Leland is one of hip's most profound attributes, namely "that it allowed Americans to reinvent themselves." Hip came to be about setting a scene of your liking and playing a role you invent. That scene is always shifting and mutating as the story of your invented life, led in the cracks and seams of a more and more regulated economy and city, develops in cooperation with a changing cast of characters.

Music, an elusive medium that can appear anywhere, became the carrier of hip, and from there it moved into fashion and products. Hip was about openness and change, and hence about the new. This means, according to Leland, that hip was both the agent of transformation and a slave to consumer culture, as in America these became synonymous: "Hip was aligned with modernism, and advertising was modernism's mass medium." Hip was about abstraction, about slickness, about the aura of the new and the open. That meant it could be used to sell, but also that it stood for an essentially free culture. It is about an attitude and a possibility, not about a fixed thing: "Hip captures this moment of anticipation, a present

tense that never becomes the done deal of the past. Hip is to crime what gangsta rap is to real gangbanging: the attitude and the lingo are the same, but the music is all implied potential, the real thing all grisly result. Hip is the frisson of the bullet or blue note still in the air, dangerous but remote. Its alternative is the romance of work, and that's no romance at all." Its hero is the trickster who "points toward what is actually happening: the muddiness, the ambiguity, the noise. They are part of the real, not something to be filtered out."

Leland's definitions are not new. He acknowledges the work of Robert Ferris Thompson, whose *African Art in Motion* (Berkeley, 1974) and *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York, 1983) established the solid art-historical basis for this story, and Ishmael Reed, the fiction writer whose seminal *Mumbo Jumbo* (Garden City, NY, 1972) is its most vivid evocation. In a wider sense, Leland's argument is one of the class of "flip and reverse it" theories (to cite a fairly hip guru, Missy Elliott) that seek to make what is ugly beautiful, what is bad good, and what is old-fashioned hip.

Whether that just makes it another trick is less important than whether we can learn something from it beyond ourselves being open to interpretations and ways of looking at our world that are the reverse of what we believe. In this case, Leland has some helpful hints. As noted, he believes that hip captures the essence of the city as a place of open, changeable scenes that inhabitants themselves can use to invent a world in which they want to live. The first question then might be: Could urban planners encourage this? Leland also points out that the final expression of hip is online: "Long after commodity fetishism divided society from the objects around it, the logic of the internet or DJ culture carries this dualism to its natural conclusion: the physical objects that hold samples or computer codes are practically irrelevant. The information doesn't exist to give the objects meaning; it is whole in itself." A second question then might be: Is this an argument for a virtual architecture?

For both questions, the answer is probably no. The whole point of hip is that it is an act of resistance and reuse. Making it easy does not help. Similarly,

it is exactly the continual presence of the real in Leland's definition that makes the power of the virtual, even if meaning comes from some sort of transcendence. Rests the question: Can architecture itself be hip? Can it be open and tricky? Can it be always poised, but never gangbanging?

Robert Venturi, quoting Arthur Heckser, said it almost half a century ago: "It is the nearness to chaos, but its avoidance, that vitiates." Somehow, being right there on the verge of nothingness, at the edge of consumer culture, violence, trendiness, and total disorder, makes for strong architecture—but only if it holds something open, poised, and ineffable. That something might be space, the old standby spiritual self-justification for architecture. Perhaps Louis Kahn was hip after all.

That concentration on pure, empty space also makes architecture a luxury, as space is just about the most expensive commodity in our culture. That however, is hip too. As Leland points out: "Though it grabs its ideas from the bottom of the economic ladder, hip lives in luxury. Poor societies worry about growing enough corn; rich societies can worry about being corny. Hip shapes how we drive, whom we admire, whose warmth we yearn for in the night. Its scent transforms neighborhoods from forbidding to unaffordable." Or, as Nelly put it more succinctly: "Forty acres and a mule, f**k that s**t, forty acres and a pool."

Architecture turns nature into shaped space, chaos into a scene for collective action, the city into a place of open structures. Architecture can be a way of sheltering space with structures that are not rigid, but reflect the reuse and reinvention of a culture (in every sense of that world) that already exists so that it gains new clarity and life. As long as it does not close down, try to hold onto rules that are no longer of use, or disappear into dreams of utopia, architecture could be pretty hip. How is the architect to achieve hipness? Leland leaves us with a way: "To be hip is to believe in the possibility of reinvention—to understand oneself as between states, neither one nor the other, without original sin, forever on the road. Or as they say in Wolof: to see, to open one's eyes."

It might be a good idea for architects to start by opening their eyes to the possibility of the hip, and to those who invented the phrase. ∎