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Citations

The City Imagined

Paul Kennon Memorial Symposium
Rice University
14 March 1992

Reviewed by Elysabeth Yates Burns McKee

On 14 March 1992, the first Paul Kennon Memorial Symposium was held in Stude Hall of Ricardo Bofill's Alice Pratt Brown Hall at Rice University and was made possible by the Paul Kennon Memorial Trust. The symposium's theme, proposed by Rice's former architecture dean, Alan Balfour, was ostensibly the past, present, and future of the contemporary city, but the subject matter lacked critical focus; if indeed there was a vision for the symposium, it was – as the title suggests – left to the imagination. Given the all-star cast, the results were disappointing. Recent events have shown that there is a significant amount of critical work to be done on the subject of the contemporary city, both theoretically and practically. Many of the architects and theorists present, however, did not engage the larger questions of the life of the city, preferring to remain within the bounds of their own work. Perhaps most of them, the architects in particular, knew each other too well, their familiarity undermining any attempt to broach serious issues for fresh insight. It was also the case that those with new ideas were not, for reasons unknown, given the chance to participate.

Mario Gandelsonas opened the morning session with his now-familiar formalist exposé titled "Mapping the City," albeit prefaced with an astonishing laundry list of current architectural issues. These included marginality of both public and private space as a determinant of power, architecture as event, contextualism, and regionalism. He continued with his research on urban patterns, really the subject of his talk: Los Angeles as the embodiment of the "rhetoric of the uncanny," with its ability to "escape the status quo" (ironic in light of recent events). He included the most up-to-the-minute component of architectural discourse, the impact of the electronic media on architecture, and announced an interest in "difference" or the "other" coupled with the "urban text as the object of desire," an apparent though vague allusion to French psychoanalytic theory.

In the end, however, Professor Gandelsonas presented his usual discourse comparing the American city (planned, the product of "passion") to the European city (unplanned, the product of "reason"), following this with ink and computer-analysis drawings of Manhattan, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Des Moines, Iowa, his most recent project. He linked many of the resultant formal "patterns" in the Des Moines presentation to a neo-Gestalt theory in which "figures" become "found objects" in the urban text. As a result of the analytic

process, an assortment of birds, bugs, and other creatures “appeared” – an episode that bore a resemblance to the reading of tea leaves. What was to become of Des Moines in light of these creatures was not readily apparent.

Gandelsonas’s partner and spouse, Diana Agrest, also focused on formal issues, centering her talk around the venerable dialectic “nature versus the city.” In a more direct manner than her partner, she grandly indicted the limitations and failures of the 20th-century city. Given the contemporary city’s institutionalized “acts of erasure” (such as can be seen in Le Corbusier’s urban programs, as well as Houston), Agrest criticized the legitimacy of planning in general. She recommends looking at the city “as it is,” perceiving what she refers to as “urban ready-mades” – reminiscent, at least in principle, of Gandelsonas’s “found objects.” “By bringing to the surface that which cannot be seen,” she is, in effect, seeking to “divine” a new dialectic – that of the city versus the suburb instead of nature versus the city. According to Agrest, this change will open up a new and more profitable discourse. Nonetheless, the conservative structural model of a dialectical framework (this versus that) remains intact.

The ever-inscrutable Peter Eisenman followed, presenting a talk roughly titled “Unfolding Frankfurt.” Although this was a change from his scheduled topic, “Visions Unfolding: Architecture in the Age of Electronic Media,” Eisenman discussed a number of issues arising from the effect of the electronic media on architecture, particularly architectural space. Largely centered around architecture’s “loss of effect,” or rather “loss of the sensual dimensions” as he described it, the Frankfurt Housing Projects are fabrications that seek an “other” kind of spatial paradigm, one that *affects and is affected* by emerging social orders. How successful or verifiable such a strategy might be is open to question. Like Gandelsonas and Agrest, Eisenman (despite his stated intentions) continues to struggle with what are principally formal issues.

Jennifer Bloomer was the bright spot of the morning session. After a series of introductory remarks on the psychoanalytic nature of language, she read a letter she had written to the late author Angela Carter (*The Passion of the New Eve*, *Shadow Dance*, *The Bloody Chamber*). Entitled “City Becoming,” it was an intensely personal and rich soliloquy on “the city as muse,” in which Dr. Bloomer paid homage to the feminist position that “the personal is the political.” Movingly performed, the piece danced around the “hard issues,” approaching the question of the city in a profoundly elliptical fashion. Many found the tactic frustrating. However, Bloomer is not known for her research on the city, and she harbored no illusions. Her work critiques both the discipline and the profession of architecture as such. According to Bloomer, architectural discourse suffers from a severe yet redeemable structural dysfunction; in other words, the very foundations of the discipline and profession are in dire need of redress. Our inability as academics and professionals is a result of something not “out there” but

rather “in here.” The failure of, as well as the hope for, architecture lies principally with architects themselves.

The afternoon session began with a good deal more promise when Rem Koolhaas took the stage. It appeared that the Dutch architect and theoretician sensed the pall that had settled on the auditorium, for he launched into a highly energized performance professing “social intercourse through form.” Koolhaas decried the motives and actions of traditional planning strategies, pronouncing them detached and irrelevant. His sardonic yet witty characterization of Houston as the prototype of the contemporary “lite city” (half the calories, half the taste) elicited both applause and consternation from the audience. As was the case during his sessions as Rice University’s Craig Francis Cullinan Visiting Professor, Koolhaas represented himself as a realist and a pragmatist, an architect who continuously and unpretentiously sifts through material evidence for clues to the state of society, the city, and architecture. Koolhaas’s theory is formulated entirely through practice; in many ways, his was the most optimistic presentation, although, as he stated, one whose success or failure was necessarily based on “low expectations.”

Following Koolhaas was the geographer Edward Soja’s “Other Spatialities.” As Soja himself stated, he did not specialize in “visuals,” as would most architects, but rather in “verbals.” As a geographer, however, his ideas necessarily reside in material form; in this sense Soja’s work is in spirit similar to Koolhaas’s, though with a decidedly academic point of view. Highlighting the theories of two noted French academics and dialecticians, Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, Soja proceeded to sketch two very different models of “spatiality,” finally proposing the possibility of a “third way” or “third kind” of space. This latter, lately the grand intrigue of a significant amount of architectural discourse, is, according to Soja, embedded in the texts of Foucault, in particular the passages in which Foucault suggests “heterotopologies” or “other landscapes.”

Commencing with a recording of Bruce Springsteen’s “Dancin’ in the Streets,” Marshall Berman (*All That’s Solid Melts Into Air*) entertained the audience with a rather unorthodox approach to the symposium’s theme. Berman aimed squarely at the social concerns of the New Left, criticizing its theorists as ideologues who prefer the ivory tower. In effect, Berman accused both the Left and the Right of being out of touch and increasingly irrelevant, stuck in a nostalgia for the 1960s and with increasingly narrow ideological confines. Berman sought direct redress and direct action for the contemporary city, thereby squarely indicting the conference participants. To make one’s bed solely in the realm of “imagination” is to deny both passively and actively the reality of the situation. The near-universal irrelevance of the day’s diatribes effectively mirrored Berman’s concerns. The emptiness of much of the discussion (is there really such a paucity of issues?) was only symptomatic of the general malaise. ■



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