

A PARADE OF STATISTICIANS

A TEMPTATION OF NUTRITIONISTS

A DESTRUCTION OF VETS

A SHREWDNESS OF ACCO

A MEMORY OF GENETICS

A DISSIMULATION OF ADV

A DRIFT OF AFFECTION PROVIDERS

A PARANOIA OF GUARDS

A CULTURE OF CURATORS

A MURMURING OF HABIT ANALYSERS

A SPRINKLING OF SPECTA

A GLARING OF CAMERAS

A PRIDE OF NEUROLOGISTS

A VIGILANCE OF CUSTODIANS

A CONTINGENCY OF WEATHER FORECASTERS

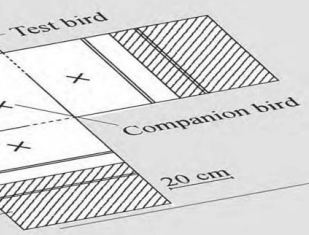


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We wondered if anyone ever likes a mole. It can be on flesh, eating away at our self-confidence. One may also think of a mole as a small animal that shuns away from the sun. Another use of the word would be that of a spy, sneaking behind the flows of our time. But suppose, if we were to expose it and be proud of it. It self-transforms into an icon, or at least acquires some sort of recognition. Once iconic, it sheds itself of its frivolities. Mustiness, exclusion, imperfections all stand aside to leave room for a new purpose: to give meaning to a cultural identity that has overcome the normative. It becomes your image.

In times of disciplinary diffusion, we dig deeper to found ourselves: only to find out that we've become a mole...in a hole. A mole that lives in a city. A mole that enjoys a chat. A mole that mostly blabbers over the mundane everythings.

"Alas," said the mouse, "the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into."

"You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.

-Franz Kafka

Conversation
13-01-18 07:25 PM

George Baird: ok. So where are you?

Mole: I'm in New York actually.

GB: That doesn't look like an office behind you.

ML: No, no... I just came back to my apartment. Well let's start with the obvious. There isn't too much that's new. I think you already know about our theme and its inherent sub-themes. One is about the compaction of things, and the other is about their consequential expansion, or the over-complication of things. Ultimately, we're trying to find some kind of middle ground between the two.

George Baird: I mean I'm certainly aware... Strangely enough, my wife and I were away for the weekend in Collingwood and as we came back we were behind a Smart Car on the 400. I'm not against Smart Cars, but I would never drive one on the highway. I don't think that's the wisest idea. There's clearly something there. Nonetheless it's interesting for me how in the poorest parts of the world the most important thing for people to have now is a cell phone. They don't even have a house or a toilet but if they have a cell phone that makes them a player in the contemporary world. But now if you want me to add cuteness into the mix...well I'm a little bit lost. If you think about YouTube for example, could we agree that maybe 30 percent of the subjects of YouTube videos involve some degree of cuteness? Pets or small children? So clearly there's some kind of connection there.

IS: I think its important to mention the discipline of architecture, rather than the physical reality of all this. Artists such as Jeff Koons or architects like Charles Moore tend to use iconography or some kind of relatable imagery as a way of connecting to their audiences. That's the bridge we want to talk about. We don't want to dwell too much on the phenomenology in the real world. I think with you, I'm more interested in what this means for the discipline of architecture. For example, Jeff Koons uses an iconic balloon poodle in some of his works, but at the same time the material he uses has properties that differ from the implied elasticity of a balloon. So there's a gap between what he is trying to communicate and why people would find it familiar.

GB: Let me say that I never quite figured out what to make of Jeff Koons. I mean I've seen a fair amount of his work. I heard him lecture at OCAD a few years ago before he was as famous as he is now. It was very clear to me that he's incredibly smart. He knows his art history backwards and forwards, and very knowledgeable when it comes to contemporary cultural theories. He is also very crafty, of course not that's of any surprise to you. At first I thought it quite abrupt to bring him up because much of his iconography could indeed be described as cute: all those puppy dogs and small animals, ponies, flowers and so on. Cuteness is for sure one of the genres that he works with. There's always a consensual shift, which is usually due to the iconography and materiality not being what's expected; there is an intentional, unsettling juxtaposition. Moore, I know better because, of course, its architecture. The Charles Moore projects that I liked were the ones where his iconography was the least explicit. I'm quite critical of the Piazza D'Italia, which might be at the back of your mind, because I thought he went off the deep end there. For me it didn't work any more. Even after saying all that, I'm not sure I'm touching on your interest in architectural discipline. Discipline, meaning how we do it?

IS: And the scope of interest.

GB: Well Moore had said he expanded that. I guess I'd have to agree. I'm not sure about Jeff Koons having an influence on architectural discipline. It had never occurred to me before. So this is a whole new thought in my brain.

IS: I think most students would know Jeff Koons, or not know him, but I think we would all recognise his work in architectural renderings; there's many of those pink sculptures of the poodle. So it may not be a direct involvement, but his presence is very real.

GB: So you're saying that there's a piece of Koons that shows up with great frequency in architectural renderings? Oh, I'm interested! Well, that's news to me! Then again, architectural renderings are a kind of sub-genre. They operate across a spectrum and this isn't a particularly contemporary issue. It's a question of rhetoric. They operate across the spectrum from consensual representation to sheer advertisement to seductive persuasion. So if this Koons thing is showing up in images, I bet it's not all consensual representation. Isn't that part of the sales pitch?

IS: I think that's the point. So it doesn't matter how many times it shows up, just the fact that it does show up means the rendering is relatable and a person might be attracted to it more so than if it hadn't been there.

GB: I agree with you that the Koons poodle would be a typical mechanism of seduction. You know, there are other things which are even more to blame. There is a type of architectural renders, especially urban design ones, which will always follow happy children with balloons. So I guess the Koons reference is just a more sophisticated version of that. It is an explicit cultural reference.

IS: To you, what is the difference stemming from the talk of Jeff Koons and Charles Moore? They both seem like they use iconography as a tool. Then what, for you, is the difference between their usage? Explicitly and obviously, one is for art and one is for architecture. In this case, does it really matter for which discipline they're applying the iconography for? Is cuteness a way to move beyond disciplinary barriers?

GB: I wonder if I have one... The thing I'm struck by your question is that I don't see the two of them in the same way. With Koons, he chooses different categories of subject material and he varies his material techniques from one batch of projects to the next. His conceptual approach has been pretty much the same from the beginning. So he has pervading themes and materials and icons and so on. I'm not saying there aren't differences but the conceptual approach is the same for all of them. Now Charles Moore, he started out as a sort of protégé of Louis Khan. So if you look at early projects of Charles Moore, they're projects that are in the genre of Louis Khan, such as his house in Berkeley. It's still modernist in its planarity and angularity, but he's interested in picturesque groupings of forms and so forth. You could then say that the Piazza D'Italia is Moore's most extreme. Then, of course, the planarity and volumetric simplicity are pretty well gone and the obvious representational iconography has taken over. So over the span of his career there is a huge shift in his conceptual approach. So I guess you could say he ends up in a place not unlike Koons. I didn't think Charles Moore was ironic, well put it this way: he certainly wasn't cynical. I, being so old, knew him. He was a very nice person. People loved Charles Moore, which is part of the reason he got so much work. So even in something like the Piazza d'Italia, which had little jokes in it, I don't think that was cynical. I think it was his idea of how to make nice buildings at that point in his career. However, with Koons, I've always had the impression that there's a big load of irony. We're all supposed to think it's terribly cute. For example, the puppy dog made out of flowers in front of the Bilbao museum, there is tension there between the sentimentality of the imagery, the irony of the scale, and the material transformation. It's kind of charged. His work makes me uneasy. They make me feel so creepy! Similarly, the fakeness of the Piazza D'Italia is quite blatant. The formal strategies of re-interpretation he employs do not go far enough from the origins of the references to be adequately modified for my taste. For example, there are buildings that are highly iconographic that I admire a lot. One of them is Ronchamp by Le Corbusier. That's a fairly rhetorical design. It's a building that calls a lot of attention to itself. When people talk about it they refer to ships hulls, nun's hats, and constellations and so on. In the same way, some people see the exterior of Frank Gehry's Disney Hall as a reference to a drive in movie screen. So I don't dislike iconography, I just like it to be subtle.

IS: It's hard not to think about Michael Graves' Disney resort with the Donald Ducks and Mickey Mice at this point.

GB: Michael Graves is a good name to bring up at this point in the

conversation. For me, it's a little bit like the Charles Moore story, only this story is way subtler. There are little narrative projects of Michael Graves that I like a lot. Even his most iconographical projects do have a lot more re-interpretation than Charles Moore's. So I would say the worst Michael Graves project would be better than the Piazza D'Italia. I think he's one of the tragic figures of Postmodernism because he got categorized as Postmodern when in fact I think he is a much more subtle designer than that.

IS: Why do you think that is?

GB: Well the good news about Michael Graves is that he's incredibly thorough and talented. He was a painter before he was an architect like le Corbusier. His collage-like juxtapositions develop painterly strategies which informed his approach to architecture throughout his career. The problem with Michael's work for me is that architecture is not purely visual; his buildings don't have tectonic authority. Graves did a public library in a small California town, and it's kind of faux Mexican. When you went up and touched it and you knocked on the piers of the colonnade, you would get an echo; Michael may not have tried it. Architecture is a strongly visual cultural phenomenon but it's not a purely visual phenomenon. How its sounds affects your idea of its character.

IS: I'm not claiming this to be my own grand discovery, but I think there's always this dialectic between... architecture that happens to be and architecture that conforms to an expectation.

GB: I certainly agree with that characterization, that opposition that you just articulated. For sure there is architecture that presents a question. Conversely there is "Hey mom look at me" architecture, which is the more common genre after all. I don't have a problem with buildings being popular. In fact, one of the things which is interesting about historic architecture is that it was oriented to a general public, which was not necessarily very sophisticated. However, people with a better-trained eye can still enjoy those same things while reading other references in it as well. I don't think there's anything about architecture that's preventing its appeal to both kinds of audiences. That's one of the reasons why I like the work of Alvar Aalto for example, it's very sophisticated but also not hard to like by the public at large.

IS: Most people, when they talk about architecture, they like to relate it to things. When they see Frank Gehry's art gallery in Toronto they like to describe it as the bone structure of a whale. Or the ROM as a crystalline rock. So for figures such as Alvar Aalto, what is it that allows his architecture to transcend this relatable quality? Is there some sort of secret that allows him to overstep any expectation of what it has to look like?

GB: Well I do think it's true that people do tend - lay people especially - to focus on iconography when it comes to architecture. But if you don't ask them, and just watch them as they're moving

around a building then I think you could discover that the building is actually getting to them in more interesting and subconscious ways. Buildings are experienced phenomenologically. They are! For sure they are. People absorb buildings spatially. They don't think of it as being intellectual. But that doesn't mean that it doesn't affect them in significant ways. There is a whole spectrum from spatial experiences, affects of enclosure to release, which are not particularly iconographic at all. You can see this phenomenon in Aalto's buildings where there are conditions that evoke emotions or desires; such as the desire to perform or to be seen as contrasted by a sense of implied enclosure. There's a very subtle range of psychological and spatial experience in Aalto's buildings. I think it's very modulated and quite powerful. So these are dimensions of architectural experience, which in my opinion, precede iconography. They don't preclude it but precede it. Those things affect human experience before the humans even have the time to think about what the building looks like. All in all, I'm not sure that architecture is getting smaller. Condos are getting smaller but townhouses in the suburbs are apparently continuing to grow bigger. The lots are smaller but I'm not sure there's a certain trajectory of scale here. That raises an issue that's more about expansion than miniaturisation. I suppose we've got things going in both directions here actually. Life is getting more complicated and moving in both directions at once.

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In such ways, mole becomes a medium through which projects, photographs, drawings, prints, and essays may express our realities in a single booklet, comprised of invited and open call entries of internal and external authors.

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