esiring Practices Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary

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Neutral Gazes and Knowable Objects

Challenging the masculinist structures of architectural knowledge

Introduction

In this paper I propose that the knowledge base of architecture perceives the world through the limited frame of masculinist rationality, a way of seeing which assumes the architect as objective observer and the building as transparent expression of that gaze:

After examining many of the founding texts of philosophy, science and political theory and history, feminists have argued that the notion of reason as developed from the seventeenth century onwards is not gender neutral. On the contrary, it works in tandem with white bourgeois heterosexual masculinities. To generalise, they argue that what theorists of rationality after Descartes saw as defining rational knowledge was its independence from the social position of the knower. Masculinist rationality is a form of knowledge which assumes a knower who believes he can separate himself from his body, emotions, values, past and so on, so that he and his thought are autonomous, context-free and objective... the assumption of an objectivity untainted by any particular social position allows this kind of rationality to claim itself as universal.1

In this reading, the Subject-architect can, through the act of reason, make a comprehensive, exhaustive and objective diagnosis of the design problem which is therefore 'true' (and where contested interpretations are seen as unknowing, irrational and/or banal). Crucially, this gaze has come to perceive the Objectbuilding as a mirror to itself: as a transparent, knowable and objective reflection 'of what it really is' (that is; how the gaze 'knows it', but where the act of looking makes itself invisible, so that the Object-building appears to be revealing its 'true' self). This, it turns out, can only be read through the gaze of masculine rationality, but is offered up as objective, universal and 'transparent' truth.

Here it will be argued that in England from around the 1830s onwards, the specific set of assumptions which enabled such a framework were selfconsciously constructed into the 'common sense' of architectural knowledge, constructed so successfully that we still often fail to 'see' the underlying beliefs we have, both about how to make architecture and how to interpret it.2 These assumptions are as follows:

1. Architectural form is seen to 'reflect' the society in which it is made. In the nineteenth century, many architectural writers argued that whilst in previous periods this occurred 'naturally', such an act of reflection could now only be undertaken consciously.3 How architecture might reflect society thus became a major component of radical architectural debates. By the 1920s, it had become such a commonplace (to avant-garde Europeans at least) that architecture did/should express the Zeitgeist, that the nature of this particular connection was no longer questioned.

- C. This relationship between architectural form and society was/is structured in a specific way. Society is described through abstract social concepts (such as progressive/industrialised/democratic) which are then expressed by/reflected in/analogous to/simultaneously occur in particular aspects of architectural form—such as the character of those who built it, the materials and technology from which it is built and/or the activities it contains.
 - 3. These abstract social concepts are linked to architectural characteristics through associative references. In the modern movement, rational was paired with rectilinear, social order with mathematical order, clean lines with the progressive and modern. In the contemporary period, pluralism is connected with layering, and complex social structures with dynamic and fragmented form.
 - 4. The appropriateness of specific sets of socio-spatial concepts as descriptions of society and/or architecture is then justified first by 'strings' of association and then through binary opposition to other adjectival chains. So rational is linked to rectilinear/plain/repetitive/industrialised, and then juxtaposed with irrational/dynamic asymmetry/complex/varied/junk. These appear to provide a 'cycle of evidence' whereby the appropriateness of an architectural conceptchain is justified by its similarity to a social concept-chain, which in turn is offered as evidence of the 'correctness' of the architectural concepts.
 - 5. Each of these associative concept chains is then given a positive or negative value, and argued as either a true or false description of society/architecture and therefore as good or bad architecture (or social values). So if [rational +] links with stable/ordered/democratic/mass, and [irrational +] with unmappable /exhilarating/transient/individualised then interpretation depends on whether, for example, 'exhilarating' is seen as a positive or negative virtue. Such a conceptual framework in fact results in the ability to argue that any particular architectural language is 'good', that it is bad, and even that it is 'good' and 'bad' simultaneously depending on the observer's interpretation of these relative values.

Yet it is this 'structure of knowing' delineating cultural artifacts as visual and/or spatial representations of aspects of society which enables (privileged) observers to consider themselves to be making a neutral and justifiable case. Since the building obviously 'reflects' society, it is the architect/cultural intellectual's claim to specialised knowledge that they in particular have the ability to create/read that reflection truthfully and objectively. As the architectural profession at the turn of the century increasingly consolidated itself around providing 'design in advance', the claim (over other built environment professionals) to this area of diagnostic/analytical knowledge became increasingly important. It simultaneously enabled architectural professionalism to appear to be 'above' lower status problems, such as economics, building production, client taste and fashion cycles.

In this paper, such a framework is not taken as a model for either the design process or for architectural criticism. Instead it is understood as a (rather idiosyncratic and culturally specific) structure of ideas through which a particular view of society is articulated as obvious and unproblematic. We then have new and interesting questions to ask. Why have ideas been constructed and maintained in this form? Whose interests does such a view legitimate and which alternative interpretations are silenced? And how might new forms of architectural practice be construed that are not framed around the assumption of a neutral gaze and an ultimately knowable object, defended through this simplistic logic of abstract socio-spatial concepts and binary oppositions?

This argument has potentially surprising results, particularly in my own field of community and feminist practice, which has conventionally felt it essential to express aspects of the social in design precisely through such adjectival chains; but where, by a simple binary reversal, an aesthetic generated from a more 'authentic' design process appears to express radical social values precisely by its opposition to the 'false' formal design approaches of the architectural avantgarde. Here I want to suggest instead that politically radical design practices can and should be generated from a deliberate refusal of socially expressive architecture and by a new valuing of formal design characteristics, but that these *must be* re-embedded in real economic, political and social processes.

To do this, I will first briefly outline how architectural practice in England came to emphasise the importance of reflecting society in building form through the paradigm of a masculinist rationality and then look at how we might begin to build alternative forms of practice.

A brief history of masculinist rationality in architectural thought

For much of the history of Western architecture, the vocabulary of building elements (such as columns and pediments) and the methods of their combination (proportion, ratios, 'figures') have been codified by tradition and precedent—what Campbell calls "techniques in conformity with long established principles".4 The continued use of both major western architectural languages, Gothic and Classical, right through to the nineteenth century was justified via the assumed certainties of beliefs handed down from Classical civilisation and from the Bible. Vocabularies of form were thus seen as 'external' to every day society and experience. These systems of form-making reinforced a order and experience. patron's claim to supreme authority—that is an authority legitimised by religious ceeding faith and the Ancients: symbolic and social interpretations of that form were a contingent element, added through the shared associations of patron and wishing in builder. For the history of Western architecture up to about 1750, attempts to inscribe it with social meanings built on or played with, these existing vocabularies of elements and the rules for their combination. Innovation, then, was limited on the one hand to variations in the manipulations of parts (what we now tend to see as more 'pure' or more 'mannerist' versions) and on the other to different interpretations of the rules of combination—that is, for example, in preferring certain number or geometric relationships to others.

Of course, whilst the bodies of design and building knowledge were codified—both in the sequence of architectural treatises following the first century Roman Vitriuvius and in the building lore of the mediaeval building guilds—they were also malleable, that is, they were adaptable to individual and group preferences, open to other influences (particularly from the East) and highly susceptible to fashion and changing interpretations. Whether it was Vitriuvius arguing for a simpler, less decadent society in third century Rome, fifteenth century Florentines identifying with an idealised image of the Republic, Palladio impressing his clients with 'domestic temples' in sixteenth century Venice, or eighteenth century English Whigs expressing their politics in what became Georgian architecture, the 'external' language of classicism proved itself very flexible to associative (but essentially contingent) social meanings among competing social groups.⁵

However, as some historians have shown (particularly in relation to France), the logic behind these architectural vocabularies began to break down in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Europe as the certainties which had

justified them were increasingly undermined. Architectural archaeology was replacing the concept of ahistorical precedent with ideas of historical development and progress and philosophers were increasingly concerned with incorporating human action into explanations of how the world worked. These shifting patterns led to a 'new' problem—how to judge the value of any particular architectural language over others. The belief in an ahistorical, externally justified precedent had, in fact, enabled individual architects and patrons to select widely from the available vocabularies, to 'add' their own social meanings. Both the massive expansion in possible examples and the critical theories which tried to order these examples by historical evolution exposed the process of architectural selection as a problem which had to be explicitly addressed.

Simultaneously the whole process of land development, building design and construction was changing. The aristocratic amateurs and artisan builders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were increasingly replaced by a new professional class (not yet sure of its various roles or disciplinary boundaries) and by the rationalised, mass production methods of new building contractors.

Many authors have argued that the publications of A.W.N. Pugin (*Contrasts*, 1836 and *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, 1841) exemplified this changing perspective. Pugin insisted on a direct relationship between architectural form and the society in which it was made. As Macleod writes:

few of the propositions of Pugin are new, but their collation and remarkable presentation made an ineradicable impact on the architectural scene. Pugin extracted, from Southey, Cobbett, and almost certainly Carlyle, the principles of social criticism which were current, and used them as a basis for contemporary architecture. What he produced out of this extrapolation was a distinctly new proposition: that the artistic merit of the artefacts of society was dependent on the spiritual, moral and temporal well-being of that society.

In so doing, Pugin shifted associative symbolic and social meanings from their contingent relationship to externally justified pre-existent architectural forms and made them central and causal. The new (and essential) design task was to find an architectural language which could be justified through the authenticity of its reflection of 'true' social meanings. Architecture could then be judged good/beautiful when it could authentically express a good/beautiful society.

Through the nineteenth century cultural intellectuals increasingly agreed that architecture *should* reflect society but, not surprisingly, they were engaged in major struggles over which were relevant social aspects to represent and which

were the most appropriate design vocabularies for expressing them. Different authors and architects made associations by reference to the 'truth' of some or all of the following: specific types of building practice, particular construction techniques and particular societal structures and values. Possible vocabularies ranged from variations on the Gothic in the earlier parts of the century, to freer mixes of Gothic, Classical and other elements by the 1860s, and to Arts and Crafts, Queen Anne and Free Styles at the turn of the century. Thus Ruskin searched for "the expression in the object of the God-given urge in man to find material through which to breathe his spirit" as specific pieces of Gothic decoration which he believed literally embodied the workman's character, whilst Morris was much more concerned to find designed forms which could express a 'whole way of life', defined through idealised understandings of mediaeval English social life.8 Paradoxically it was the search for one authentic architectural language which itself produced Victorian eclecticism and variety.

Here a specific form of 'knowing' (constructed around particular understandings of national identity, masculinity/femininity and social, professional and class positionings, as well as personal beliefs) was justified as objective and obvious through a series of binary oppositions which juxtaposed concepts such as rational/irrational, deep/surface, structural/decorative, essential/trivial, masculine/feminine and then judged one set 'obviously' true, precisely through both 'good' associational concept chains and through their assumed relationship to 'bad' opposites. This, in turn, was/is based on the assumed neutrality (and simultaneous superiority) of one particular Subject-gaze over others. An essential justification for that gaze itself was the need to express the assumed autonomous cognisance of the Object as architectural form, thereby centring the design process on the physical revelation of a building's 'inherent' purposefulness, on its rational coherence between forms and across types, and of the 'honesty' with which it described the society in which it was/is made.

However, such a construction of Subject-gaze and Object-building contains its own contradictory flaws. The two are linked by an associative relationship where one is seen to 'stand for' the other truthfully and without redundancy. The act of association (and the particular social values it supports) then hides itself behind masculinist rationality and appears to no longer exist. Yet associative connections are, by their very nature, partial, variable and contested. William Morris' image of how men and women should behave was both *not* obviously 'true', nor somehow 'authentically' contained in specific appearances or spatial arrangements. It is only the reinforcing power and associational 'cycle of evidence' which has such a seductive logic. Similarly Modernism's or Postmodernism's many attempts to create new, more 'correct' forms, justified as an expression of some aspect of society, does not, in reality, extricate architecture

from the messy and contested territories of economics, politics, social structures and values, culture and power. Instead, it traps architecture in an artificial 'higher' plane of moral rectitude, professional neutrality and disregard of the market, leading in the current political and economic climate, to almost complete marginalisation. Recent criticism, both politically and more popularly, of architects' and other professionals' beliefs in their own neutrality and the accuracy of their gaze, has led to a profound crisis in architecture (and a deep undermining of its assumed body of knowledge) in the contemporary period.

Modernism and masculinist rationality

The bundle of concepts around which these notions of an authentic associative form for architecture 'describing' aspects of society were consolidated into architectural 'common sense' and taken forward into a more 'unified' Modernism were structural rationality, honesty to materials, and form which expressed content truthfully. By the early twentieth century, this framework supporting particular architectural languages as a 'true' reflection of society, had began to interlock smoothly with concepts of public sector professionalism. It made sense because specific forms of building and urban design were justified by a 'true' relationship to the social values of a newly forming welfare state. They were framed as both separate and ethically superior to the free market and the cash nexus (that is, to the context within which architecture was actually produced) and required specific expert aesthetic knowledge which was offered up as simultaneously socially and ethically appropriate, rationally objective and both progressive (the best) and the (unproblematic and obvious) *norm*.

In the short-lived period of High Modernism in England (say 1945–1968) new oppositional concepts (which had been argued out intellectually, via European modernist theories through the inter-war period) became dominant among radical architects, who, during this period, tended to be concentrated in the public sector. The act of association itself was now perceived to be false; architecture was to be truly transparent, to express itself as it really was through the language of building itself (that is, structural elements and materials). The language of a radical vernacular in Britain (represented by places like Hampstead Garden Suburb, London and the huge inter-war cottage estates such as Wythenshawe, Manchester) was increasingly undermined both because it was perceived to be associated with a romanticised English past and because it did not 'express' industrialised progressive society. Instead, binary oppositions framing society as divided into (false) appearance and (true) essence, surface and depth, superstructure and base, were literally translated into architectural form as decoration (trivial, superficial, false, feminine) and structure/form (essential, honest, true, masculine).9 This is masculinist rationality

at its clearest: a cultural elite literally attempting to represent society in built form as transparent and totally knowable—exposing architecture's (society's) structural essence and disposing of its decorative surface weaknesses. They were deeply well-meaning, but blind to the specificity of their own discourses which were taken to be obvious, rational and universal, and blind to, and often dismissive of, the interpretations of Others.

Of course, such a formulation contained the seeds of its own destruction. First, there was basic popular resistance to accepting the specific associational references of a professional and cultural intelligentsia. Whilst the structure of thought perceiving architecture (and other cultural artifacts) as a reflection of social values did have popular resonance metaphorically in language, the assumed values of design intention bore little connection to their popular transformations on reception. Modern and progressive rationality, reflected architecturally in much post-war public sector housing through use of the repetitive grid, was 'renamed' an imprisoning conformity—Alcatraz. Furthermore, these associational references were clearly not enough to articulate the complexity and variety of different lived experiences. The symbolic resonance of 'streets in the air' or 'defensible space' actually obscures rather than elucidates the economic and social interrelationships such phrases aim to describe. 10 Even worse, the physical making of these associative images has had, in return, unintended and often unsatisfactory consequences on 'the social'. Yet the consolidation of a professional aesthetic built on producer intentions and associations as both obvious and true meant that these alternative interpretations literally could not be heard. By the 1970s, however, popular opinion, whatever its political stance, was challenging these suppressions and frustrations.

The architectural establishment, in attempting to stand above the cash nexus, the market and 'fashion' had developed a body of knowledge which centred on offering 'representational' solutions to economic, social and political inequalities and conflicts. With the rise of Thatcherism in the 1980s, the Right was able to undermine not only this form of architectural expertise but also public sector professionalism in general by merely reversing certain associational connections. 'Tower Block' shifted smoothly from Utopia to Dystopia (without anyone needing to bother analysing the thick complexities of housing production and consumption processes in Britain), the Left was delegitimised and the architectural profession itself now *silenced* as the Other (in opposition to 'public common sense') without any obvious representational truths on which to rely.

Postmodern architectural knowledge(s)

Part of the decisive shift in ideas often called Postmodernity has been the challenge to the neutrality of the gaze and to the 'transparency of the objectbuilding; the investigation of the possibilities allowed by a deliberate lack of correspondence between objects, buildings, functions and expressions of society; and the inherent problems in structuring knowledge through binary oppositions (where one is simultaneously the norm and superior through its relationship with the Other). However, as I have described elsewhere, it is clear that the assumptions of masculinist rationality remain deeply embedded in many contemporary architectural debates and practices.¹¹ Within architecture the delegitimation of Modernism has been predominantly interpreted as a crisis of representation (rather than, say, economic, political, cultural or design processes). As with previous shifts from one architectural style to another, the search is on again to find a language of form which (this time) really and truly reflects the society in which it is made. This could be a more accurate representation of 'what people want' (popular vernacular), or an expression of the essence of peoples desires (phenomenology) or the making, through form, of society's new chaotic, surface and relativist characteristics (Deconstruction). All, of course, are doomed to failure. All are constructed on associational relationships offered up as universal and authentic through the distorting lens of masculinist rationality.

The argument is, then, that whilst many architects are attempting to readdress theories of space and form, the 'space' of dominant architectural theory itself remains blurred and underexposed. In terms of a critical practice of design, the framework of rationalist masculinity which ignores its own positioning and believes in an ability to create/interpret form through the associative adjectival chains 'describing' society must be ripped open: first, to an awareness of the architects' own partiality, secondly, to the impact of engagement with the great multitude of everyday social associations and their various 'positionings' rather than merely relying on reductivist abstractions of A/not A and, thirdly, to making a commitment in both theory and practice to involvement in the economic and social beyond representation.

Changing practices

I believe that this aspect of architectural knowledge is not only now deeply undermined politically and popularly but that it has also prevented potentialities in *thinking* through the social (and especially radical social ideas) in architectural terms. Feminist and radical community architects have been equally constrained by an avant garde architectural knowledge focused on translating (alternative)

aspects of gender and class into built form. In the 1970s we believed that the architect could be an enabler for an alternative aesthetic generated by empowering people through involvement in the design process. This was, and is, a noble aim. Yet, in my experience, the frame of masculinist rationality meant an unfortunate combination. Strong (frequently abstract) political values combined with deep professional angst about making any formal or architectural choices at all. We hoped that aesthetics would somehow spring 'automatically' from a more democratic process. In reality, the language of (community) form was all to often based on designers believing they should express 'ordinary' social values through primary colours and whitewashed blockwork.

Here, I want to propose some alternative disruptions to this masculinist model of architectural knowledge as part of broader attempts to think through more appropriate forms of practice:

- 1. A refusal to conceptualise architecture as a mirror of society. Architectural form is not a map of social activities, nor a representation of individual psychology, social values, or 'society'. Form is free to have its own language relating to abstract concepts of beauty and quality. These are, of course, not external to society, but an integral part of culture. As such, they must be contested and argued over in order for architecture to remain alive. The key issue, though, is not architects arguing over what each formal move might represent associationally, but enabling equality of opportunity in engaging with issues of *pleasure in form*, in what constitutes beauty, comfort, elegance. One model for this is obviously Lubetkin and Tecton (chastised in their own time for 'inappropriate' formalism) but which will necessarily transmute as a result of the changed development, regulatory and procurement processes of the late twentieth century.
- 2. Whilst not attempting to construct universal abstract socio-spatial concepts of society through the myth of the neutral gaze, we can still use the actual and potential associational languages of relating to objects/spaces for what they are: metaphors for aspects of social life articulated by different social groups (with different degrees of power and authority). There is no 'proper' language to be found here, or moral high ground on which to sit. These are the partial and contested languages of groups competing over territory and meaning. Within the knowledge base of architecture, an acknowledgement of these languages—variable through time, space and 'position'—is threatening (whilst dismissed as trivial), because they undermine the professionals' reliance on masculinist rationality to justify the 'truth' of their solution over others. It is these languages which firmly 'place' every observer within a socio-economic and cultural milieu. It is within these languages of both representation and space-making that a way

can be found of engaging with the struggles for position around aesthetic and spatial practices which simultaneously analyse inequalities in access to and control over both territories and meanings.

- 3. Associational qualities linking social and formal characteristics are neither central nor fixable: they are contingent, partial and contested. What is more, associational qualities do not need to be structured around A/not A. Architects can play with and exploit different associational meanings and make new and genuinely 'believable' relationships which are knowledgeable and explicit both about their sources and their potential audience. Such languages already exist in the fashionable spaces of the privileged (clubs, designer shops, bars) but make no challenge ethically, politically or socially. What might happen if we could liberate this formal energy to a socially committed architecture-as-fashion which plays with and disrupts the categories of the status quo (secretary/boss, teacher/pupil, husband/wife)?
- 4. Architecture *is* deeply social as a *process*. Radical practice needs to regain a concern with disrupting existing patterns of power and control across the whole development, design, building and regulatory process. Such activity should attempt to reallocate both actual resources and formal qualities to those with the least power. It should re-engage with key contemporary issues about the free market and the public interest, about the relationships between individuals and society, about ethics and about the nature of professional roles.
- 5. Architectural professionals need to accept, and be explicit about, the partiality of their own gaze, and the very minor importance of issues of representation compared to economic and political processes in affecting building form.

This does not negate the value of architectural knowledge and expertise; instead it moves it to a different place. These architects would have sophisticated skills in the formal manipulation of three-dimensional spaces and an up-to-date involvement with, and broad based discussion of, design and popular cultures. They would combine this with a detailed understanding of, and an entrepreneurial approach to, how procurement, design, building and management processes impact on the actual shape of buildings and of the complexity of relationships between architectural form and its actual social use and experience by different groups in society. This is a rather different mixture to the two main available contemporary roles: on the one hand the socially and politically committed who refuse formalism but rely on associative representation to compensate for lack of political power, and on the other sophisticated formal explorations by an architectural avant-garde, also based on

associational values articulating 'the social', but completely abstracted from actual political, economic, social and cultural processes.

Only by unravelling the limitations of masculinist rationality, by arguing for the partial but committed gaze, and by analysing buildings not as knowable objects but as unstable and changing mediators of territory and meaning, can we begin to escape this impasse. Only then can we begin to define new forms of architectural practice that can be both socially responsible and develop building design that is centred on an interest in *pleasure in form*.

Notes

- 1 Rose, G., Feminism and Geography, London: Polity Press, 1993, pp. 6 and 7.
- 2 Boys, I., Concrete Visions? Representing Society through Architecture 1830 -1990, Ph.D. thesis, University of Reading, forthcoming.
- 3 Mordaunt-Crook, J., The Dilemma of Style: Architectural Ideas from the Picturesque to the Post-modern, London: John Murray, 1989.
- 4 Campbell, C., The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, p. 148.
- There are now some excellent studies of the commissioning, designing and making of buildings in different historical periods which show all too clearly the competitive struggles between wealthy and powerful patrons supporting particular versions of Gothic or Classical forms through making associative links to their own cultural, religious and political values. See, for example, Goldthwaite, R., The Building of Renaissance Florence, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1980. Ackerman, J., Palladio, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966, Saumarez-Smith, C., The Building of Castle Howard, London: Faber, 1990.
- 6 Rykwert, J., The First Moderns: The Architects of the Eighteenth Century, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1980, Vidler, A., The Writings on the Wall: Architectural Theory in the Late Enlightenment, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1987.

- MacLeod, R., Style and Society: Architectural Ideology in Britain 1835-1914, London: RIBA Publications, 1971, pp. 10 and 11.
- 8 Swenarton, M., Artisans and Architects: The Ruskinian Tradition in Architectural Thought, London: Macmillan Press, 1989, p. 3.
- For a discussion of the association of femininity and decoration, masculinity and 'essence' and notions of fashion in modern European architecture, see McLeod, M., "Undressing Architecture: Fashion, Gender and Modernity", in Singley, P. and Fausch, D. (eds.), Architecture in Fashion, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994.
- Boys, J., "From Alcatraz to the OK Corral: Gender and British Post-war Housing Design", in Kirkham, P. and Attfield, J. (eds.), A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design, London: Womens Press, 1989 and "Women and Public Space", Matrix, Making Space: Women and the Man-made Environment, London: Pluto Press, 1984.
- Boys, J., "(Mis)Representations of Society: Problems in the Relationships between Architectural Aesthetics and Social Meanings", in Palmer, J. and Dodson, M. (eds.), Design and Aesthetics, London: Routledge, 1995.