

A Crisis of Expectations: Recovering the Figurative in Architecture

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“Matter, conquered or deformed in the utensil, recovers its splendor in the work of art. The poetic operation is the reverse of technical manipulation. Thanks to the former, matter reconquers its nature: color is more color, sound is completely sound. In poetic creation there is no victory over matter or over the instruments, as the vain aesthetics of artisans wishes, but a setting free of matter.... Without ceasing to be tools of meaning and communication, they turn into ‘something else’. That change – unlike what happens in technology – does not consist in an abandonment of their original nature, but in a return to it. To be ‘something else’ means to be the ‘same thing’...”¹



Borne, monotype, 2010, by Clive Knights

Who is the audience for contemporary architecture: the client, the user group, the general public, the aesthete, the tourist? Unlike the other arts that have been separated and distributed across the cultural terrain, and accommodated within their specialist civic and commercial environments of concert hall, art gallery, theatre, library, movie-house and so on, or further dispersed into the privatized environments of each home, each tablet, each phone, architecture occupies an ambiguous position in the sensibility and expectations of those who experience it.² Yet architecture frames the manner of accommodation of every other cultural practice; it articulates the setting for the relentless execution of mundane necessities such as eating, drinking, defecating, sleeping, breathing, and copulating; for the administration of bureaucratic processes such as government and trade; for the performance of hermeneutic enterprises such as art, medicine and law; and for the enunciation of transcendental aspirations such as ethics and religion.

¹ Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*, trans. R. L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973) p12. This paper is dedicated to the memory of the late Dalibor Vesely, the most erudite architectural thinker of the last fifty years

² I am inspired here by H. G. Gadamer's concept of 'aesthetic differentiation' in *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975) p76

In the full, elaborate context of contemporary living, what exactly is expected of architecture? Should it be an efficient tool offering technical solutions to the problems of day-to-day living, an instrument of systematic alleviation or removal of obstacles to foster efficient living? Is it an extension of the natural capacities of the evolving human organism in attuning itself to its environment across an arc of evolutionary change? Is it a commodity in the materialist exchange of personal possessions, quantified and valued in either monetary or egotistical terms? Is it a linguistic practice contributing to the plethora of communicative media carrying messages back and forth across a field of information transmission and retrieval? Assailed by all of these, perhaps legitimate demands, depending on one's value base, it is apparent that the making of architecture has become a confused and fragmented practice. The contention here is that architecture, alongside the partnering arts, has forgotten its responsibility, above all else, to enable human beings to "participate in the generative power of their world to render it and human existence meaningful."³ Architects, for the most part, have abandoned the hermeneutic charge of architecture to re-configure the environment in mimetic reflection of its prefigured givenness.⁴ That is, to interpret the world in recognition of identity resonating across an ineffably differentiated context of life.⁵

In *The Tempest*, through the reciprocity of Caliban and Ariel, Shakespeare reminds us that human life unfolds across a fragile mortal surface poised between limitless depth extending both beneath us and above. Our thin tissue of mundane and temporary human existence is underpinned by an unfathomable region of bodily potential, a bestial domain of gestures, carnal interactions, and liaisons with the earth, while being over-arched by an equally inexhaustible expanse of intellectual potential, a celestial region of ideas, nimble propositions and vaporous inter-mingling of spirits.

Three conditions are re-articulated over and over again, it seems, in the great works of culture. Firstly, the inevitability of coming to an end, of human finitude in death, of mortality. Secondly, the delicious gratifications of exploring with our bodies the nature of the world, its matter, its material, including our flesh, and the flesh of others. And thirdly, the transcendent freedom of ideas carried by language towards ever new horizons; gestures and words languishing in the sheer insurmountability of it all, that unending scope of possibility that generates our special human anxiety, along with our relentless need to find expression for it; that is, to communicate to each other what it is like to be human, failing each time to reach quite far enough, and in that failure discovering the incentive to do it all over again.⁶

Human cultures are abundant with the residue of this need to communicate the complex profundity of human experience. It is as if the multitude of expressions, those that we seem comfortable to recognize as art, are each an inadequate answer to one or other of the same, recurring primordial questions such as – Why do we die? Why do we join together in groups?

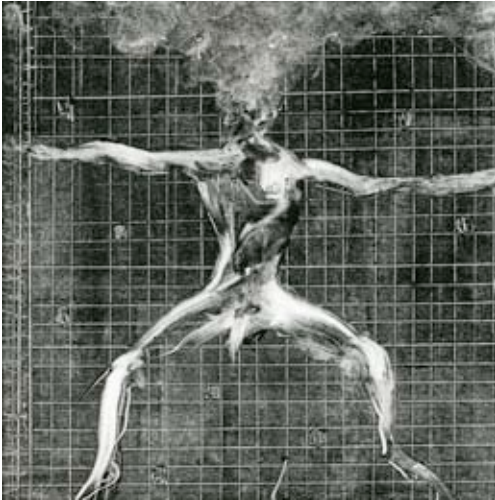
³ William Schweiker, *Mimetic Reflections: A Study in Hermeneutics, Theology and Ethics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990) p2

⁴ I refer here to the substantial elaboration of the poetics of storytelling by Paul Ricoeur, in particular the three related concepts of prefiguration - configuration - refiguration. See *Time & Narrative Volume 1* (Chicago: UChicago Press, 1990) part 1, chapter 3

⁵ For an inquiry into the philosophical setting in support of the contemporary relevance of mimesis and the dynamics of metaphor in architecture, referencing Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, see Clive Knights, "The Fluctuation of Likeness: Body, Work, Swamp" in *Scroope 4, Cambridge Architecture Journal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University School of Architecture, June 1992) pp17-23

⁶ This aporia might be, deceptively, simply stated as, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty, "I, like you, am always fully present, but never fully revealed," from which issues an inexhaustible curiosity to explore the 'depth' of our corporeal predicament. Or as Ricoeur suggests, in discussing the possibility of selfhood, taking shape against a "ground of being at once actual and potential", quoted by W. David Hall, *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative: The Creative Tension Between Love and Justice* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007) p14.

Why do we love others? Why do we experience envy? Why do we share our meals? Why do we want what we haven't got? Why do we care about the feelings of our neighbors? Why do we feel responsible? Why do we suffer guilt?



Conspirator, monotype, 2010, by Clive Knights

These and others are the great questions of humanity, pondered since ancient mythology, embodied in archaic output from creation myths to the layout of cities to the epic poem. These are the persistent questions of medieval scholasticism, embodied in human artifice from the stones of cathedrals to the synchrony of the chant. These are the inspirational questions of Renaissance painting and sculpture fully integrated with their architectural settings. These are the rousing questions of 17th and 18th century opera, of 19th century music and 20th century literature and theatre. In fact, these questions continue to be the animating force of the most moving contemporary cinema, literature, theatre, dance, even popular music, where these arts continue to embrace a responsibility to engage the questions while, it should be acknowledged nevertheless, that many do not.

It is clear, by the paucity of contemporary discourse on the subject, that the profession of architecture has lost contact with its communicative responsibility to the cultural milieu. It is argued here that making architecture, alongside the other arts, is fundamentally a hermeneutic endeavor, operating as a language by which to interpret one thing in terms of another: specifically human actions in terms of material and spatial gestures. Architects must offer the outcome of this translation to others, for those others to interpret themselves. Communication happens with the conversion of a potential for meaning into an emergence of meaning; as the invocation of a common territory, understood by, and enfolding, co-interpreters in a validating event of participation; enunciator and audience temporarily united.⁷ As Vesely states:

“Communication itself has no identifiable origin. It takes place in a world that is already to some extent articulated, acting as a background for any possible communication or interpretation. Most important, communication is always a dialogue between the new possibilities of representation and the given tacit world, described in modern hermeneutics as an effective history. The tacit

⁷ The poet Hart Crane ponders “The question is more important to me than it perhaps ought to be; but as long as poetry is written, an audience, however small, is implied, and there remains the question of an active or an inactive imagination as its characteristic.” A letter “From Mr. Crane to the Editor (Harriet Monroe)” in *Modern Poetics* ed. J. Scully (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) p163

world is never fully accessible to us. Always to some extent opaque it can be grasped or represented only through its symbolic manifestations⁸



Wanderer, monotype, 2010, by Clive Knights

Communication is shared experience, not dictatorial or monological, and certainly not instrumental, but rather an event of the revelation of human commonality as a figure against the ground of human differences. The perpetual re-making of this figure is the perennial responsibility of the arts (including architecture), it is the basis of their ethical role, their duty of care, such that by participation in the arts, by a willingness to interpret them, a human audience maintains connectivity to the collective quest for the 'good life,' sustaining the *animating question* of 'what ought to be' over and above an *enumerative report* of 'what is'. Here, human freedom finds its form in taking up an attitude towards the givenness of our found condition as living-dying, self-reflective organisms, as opposed to merely enduring the immanent processes of life and death. It is through the linguistic capacity that humans take a stand in the world, moving beyond containment within pure instinct (the animal predicament), and the sedimentation of habit, to rise up through the house of language to the opening of horizons.

The role of architecture as a figurative medium is no less to interpret human situations by mustering the communicative capacities of materials borrowed from the earth, to deploy acts of communal engagement through the metaphoric turn, that profound motivation to open up a perception of 'what something is' to a projection of 'what it is like.'⁹

Put another way, poetic making leads to the recognition of what is commonly valued in a diverse and differentiated world. It is by a continuous reincarnation of value in material works, reiterating

⁸ Dalibor Vesely, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation: The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004) p215. George Steiner goes further by saying "Only art can go somewhat towards making accessible, towards waking into some measure of communicability, the sheer inhuman otherness of matter... the retractions out of reach of rock and wood, of metal and of fibre... It is poetics, in the full sense, which inform us of the visitor's visa in place and in time which defines our status as transients in a house of being... wholly outside our will and comprehension." in *Real Presences* (Chicago: UChicago Press, 1989) p140.

⁹ To paraphrase Aristotle, who addresses the efficacy of likeness directly in *The Poetics*, "The greatest thing by far is to have command of metaphor. This alone can not be imparted by another, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for the similarity in dissimilars."

its pertinence, offering it to be interpreted as such, that humans can gather around the work in agreement. The goal of one who performs the metaphoric gesture is to sustain agreement while reinvigorating it, to transform the world as it unfolds for 'me' into the world as it unfolds for 'us', to perpetually activate "a fusion of horizons."¹⁰

With reference to a recently implemented festival structure as example, the session will ponder the relevance of placing figuration at the helm of the architectural enterprise, supported by the expediciencies of economy, program and technique, as opposed to being led by them.



Diversion Design-build, 2014 Pickathon Music Festival, Happy Valley, Oregon (Travis Bell & Clive Knights)

¹⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p273