

Chapter 18

Everything counts in large amounts

(The sound of geography collapsing) FAT

A little after midday on 12 December 1901, three bursts of electromagnetic radiation travelled above the Atlantic ocean at 186,000 miles per second ... beep beep beep, from Poldhu, in the south-western corner of England to Marconi's cabin on top of a hill in St John's, Newfoundland, Canada. Three beeps that spelt 'S' in Morse code. These beeps were radio transmissions connecting two geographically distant people who, just before lunch and breakfast respectively, experienced something unique. They heard the sound of geography collapsing. Marconi had delivered with an induction coil and a spark discharger an experience previously promised and faked by mystics and shamans.

Proto-Modernists, meanwhile, had their eye on the tail end of the industrial revolution. They were enamoured with the formal characteristics of new machines, vehicles and industrial structures. These became the mainstays of the Modernist source book and part of the pseudo-functional quasi-logic of Modernist rhetoric. But it is possible that there was a subtext to Modernism which wasn't part of this rhetoric. A subtext born of wireless communication. Something that reaches out to us across a century of exponential development of radio communications and broadcasting.

With Marconi's radio in mind, those key Modernist concerns of the open plan and the glazed curtain wall may not just be accidents of evolution in construction technology. Perhaps they are the first signs of an architecture that seeks to respond to the new experiences of communications. Connecting places that once were separate, dissolving physical boundaries between rooms and the things that go on in them, blurring relationships between the inside and the outside. Maybe the hand basin at the Villa Savoye stands as a totem not of functionalism but of the electronic dissolution of space. Maybe Modernism is an architecture made by and for people who dream of being everywhere, all the time, simultaneously. Maybe this unacknowledged Modernist subtext is the one that is the most relevant to a world where ocean liners rust in breakers' yards while their sentimental image haunts us through digitally rendered, Oscar-winning romantic epics.

Almost a century after Marconi, Microsoft trademarked the advertising slogan 'Where do you want to go today?' They were unwittingly - but catchily - rephrasing David Greene and Mike Barnard's 1971 Archigram project 'The Electric Aborigine',

which was, they suggested, a 'social chameleon'. Both of these ideas talk about the way electronic and communication technology affects our physical and social occupation of the world, the things that happen when we use our collection of high street electronics: TVs, laptops, modems, video cameras, phones (and whatever else our array of credit lines can stretch to). Our identities become fragmented and multiplied by them, whether it's the information transcribed magnetically on the back of credit cards, or cell phone SIM cards, multiple e-mail accounts, electronic avatars or customer profiles. While unidentified companies sweep our credit ratings, and web browser cookies collate our interests, we find our own identities and contexts shifting. Bill Gates says that by clicking and looking we are going somewhere; David Greene thinks we change ourselves. And they're both saying that when we're looking, reading and watching, we're being. Experience makes media part of us.

The medium is not the only message. It communicates particular and precise information. Marconi's Morse code 'S' and Rod Stewart's 'We are Sailing' heard on crackling AM are entirely different. Both the medium and the contents are important and let us engage with more intangible things. (You might say Rod is in the detail.) When Marshall McLuhan claimed that a light bulb is information, but that we can not recognise it as such because it is pure information, he was only half right. A trip to the local electrical store might have set him straight. A bulb is information all right, but there is content too. A plain-glass, 60 W bayonet bulb - or whatever the current local default type - might encourage the same mistake. But when we see a flickering element and a tapered bulb, we recognise an electric representation of a form of lighting associated with romantic evenings, religious ceremony and birthday cakes. SoftTone, EcoTone or ClassicTone bulbs have different meanings. A light bulb has a specific cultural content - any light bulb.

McLuhan's misreading is one commonly made by architects: the idea that objects and things can be 'pure', abstract and without meaning. The white walls of Modernism (as seen in international galleries, designer boutiques and luxury apartments) are conceptualised as things without cultural value - free from symbol, significance and origin. Abstraction (a.k.a. the banishment of representation and the diffusion of content) is what architects seem perversely interested in. Keeping content out of architecture is like trying to maintain a vacuum in a paper bag: stuff just keeps leaking in. To flip Le Corbusier's slogan, there are Modernist Eyes Which Do Not See.

The Modernist conceit of abstraction was welded to the idea that decoration could not be justified as a functional part of architecture. Decoration was derided as a trivial pursuit (the sober Modernist men compared it to the frivolity of ladies' fashions, as opposed to the serious nature of their own dress). The serious thing was function. Ornament was symbolic of historical forms of architecture, which were non-den\ bourgeois and associated with the serfdom of the working class (interestingly, Pugin



had laid the blame for unsuitable decorative design on the appalling taste of the working man). Decorative and stylistic tropes were of the old order and, hence, anti-revolutionary. The banishment of ornament was a symbolic break with bourgeois tradition.

However misconceived this notion of abstraction was, it is now a central and unassailable tenet of the Modernist orthodoxy. Ornament, criminalised by Adolf Loos, remains taboo and stigmatised almost a century later. And this extreme position quickly moved from an articulate and progressive programme to an arcane and mystical belief. The importance of abstraction was tied up with changing politics, growing economic freedom and optimism in the promise of industrialisation. Strangely, the concern with appearance and surface was thought to be authentic and honest. A hundred years on, the Modernist cop who resides within us still attempts to police this moral and civil code.

Ironically, Modernism's enduring success has been as a status symbol, an aesthetic of First World luxury that looks just great in a double-page glossy spread. As Mies's clients might tell you, less costs more. Modernism's stylistic endurance is strangely associated with that which it sought to destroy. While this may ridicule the ethics of early Modernist architecture, it also demonstrates that our own conception of Modernist architecture needs revising. Authenticity and honesty are now attributes which are deliberately constructed as core brand values.

Maybe it's time to decriminalise decoration and arrange an amnesty on ornament. After all, a functionalist take on the information revolution would identify decoration as the functional apparatus of branding, the visible structure of communication. Decoration is precisely the way that the Pepsi can differentiates itself from a can of Coke in the newsagent's glass-fronted fridge. In a world where we have a surplus of everything - where all cars go, where all mobile phones work, where all computers will do the job, where all buildings can stand up, keep the rain out and comply with codes and regulations - the value is no longer in the hardware. It's in the communication of ideas. In other words, it is not the hardware, it is the experience that counts. It's the experience which changes the world.

In 1956 Dr Robert Adler led a team of engineers working on the first use of ultrasonic technology in the home as an approach for a practical wireless TV remote control. The transmitter used no batteries; it was built around aluminium rods that were light in weight and, when struck at one end, emitted distinctive high-frequency sounds. Zenith branded it 'Space Command', and it revolutionised TV tuning worldwide. The TV remote control caused households across America to rearrange their

living room furniture. It also fundamentally altered our relationship with content, and so our experience of watching TV.

Life must have been restless before the invention of the remote control. Imagine having to walk up to the set and turn to a different channel. While the remote control was designed to ease navigation through proliferating channels, it had an indirect but profound consequence on the medium, causing us to casually fragment painstakingly constructed content and narrative as we flick through, hoping to find something that catches our eye. Countless virtual worlds flicker on cathode ray tubes while our thumb pumps the CH+ button, juxtaposing images which follow each other more quickly and strangely than all the buildings on the Las Vegas strip. Juxtapositions of narrative, scale, geography, real-time, recorded, genre, culture and subculture, point of view and atmosphere. Channel hopping changed the world.

If it changed our living rooms - and the way we see the world - it also changed our cities. It is often argued that Los Angeles is the first post-car city. This argument provides a Modernist/functionalist explanation for the centreless city and sprawling suburban metropolis (remember, next time you hear this, that the car is a potent Modernist symbol). Maybe a more instructive reading might be a city after wireless communication. The meaning of the city has been altered by the pressures that electronic communications have exerted on the public realm. Things which used to have a public physical presence are becoming invisible, transformed into activities conducted privately and individually. The contemporary city is riddled with intricate confusions of public and private, fragmented desires and needs - a strange cocktail of collective meanings and individual assertions that recalls Robert Venturi's remark, 'Americans don't need piazzas: they should be at home watching TV.'

Communication technology carries content that supersedes its urban incarnation. Not only functionally, but symbolically too. Cities are both physical and virtual. They exist as both images and bricks. We see banks that manifest themselves simultaneously as invisible electronics and as huge iconic towers. This mass of information bound up in and relating to urban places tells us that the contemporary city is about communication. It is a place that is very different from its various historical conceptions: the Classical model of the *piazza*, the Modernist idea of the plaza or the Situationist notion of the street. Which means that if contemporary design is about anything, it's about identity and communication. Or, to be more exact, about the con-adiations and negotiations of the simultaneous identities that we slip in and out of. Ralph Lauren's bank manager knows this well. A guy called Ralph Lifshitz from a New York Jewish ghetto works as a salesman at Brooks Brothers (home of conservative American tailoring) and unearths its more ethnic heritage. Mythologising the aesthetic of English public schools at the turn of the last century, lacing it with Ivy League memorabilia and creating a nostalgic version of wealth and privilege which he

sells to young urban black America, whose streetwise patronage gives aspirational credibility to real life English public schoolboys and other white, middle-class markets. Lauren says (in language that has echoes of heroic Utopian Modernism): 'My goal in design is to achieve the ultimate dream - the best reality imaginable.' And these are realities that exist as objects, images, aspirations and desires. They are as ephemeral as perfume and magazines, as real as James Cameron's *Titanic* or the Villa Savoye. We experience this reality through diverse media, including chairs, jumpers, household paint, as well as more conventional media. While the Modernists dismissed fashion as trivial, Ralph Lauren knows just how important it can be. Media become part of

us.

This Laurenite conception perhaps allows us to understand Archigram's 'Cushicle' project as something other than the absurdist techno-fantasy that architects love. It is perhaps a cultural metaphor. You could say the Cushicle argues that the Anglo-Saxon home, redolent with symbolism and bound up with ideas of personal and social identity, has qualities that are (at least) equivalent to an architectural understanding of apparel. The place where one identifies oneself is no longer only the front lawn or the mantelpiece. From the labels on our jeans to the pediment of City Hall, we can't help but iterate identity.

What we see here is a kind of concentric family tree (albeit one that sometimes doubles back on itself in an incestuous way), a cultural lineage which spins out from the object. Meanings bounce and connect from one point to another with the complexity of traces of smashed atoms: the trails of quarks, electrons, positions and neutrinos, and unidentifiable other stuff. Objects are snagged and entwined with the world that surrounds them: cultural beacons as much as clothes. Truth and myth are entwined. The world constructed by Ralph Lauren could be said to resemble a (mostly pleasant) conspiracy theory where fact, suspicion and fiction multiply endlessly. The stories which spin out of Ralph's world are constructed, undermined, adjusted and rewritten in the pursuit of his (and our) dream. This is the Jencksian notion of double coding to the nth power. Which begins to erode the classic Post-Modern diametric position in relation to Modernism. In other words, it's more than just 'either/or' or 'both/ and'. Everything counts.

Perhaps there is a future for architecture. Somewhere far from the ever-more-desperately extravagant Modernist manipulations which claim to present a constantly brand-new paradigm. Far from architects tied to their rendering packages and fascinated by the technology of production in exactly the same way as their Modernist forefathers. Far from architects performing a kind of unwitting karaoke homage to their heroes, whilst simultaneously claiming a break with that self-same tradition. A breath of fresh air that might involve retiring the long-in-the-tooth and frankly decrepit notional equation experimental/radical/avant-garde = formally original/heroically singular/

iconographically iconoclastic. A modern architecture that is immersed in its social and political contexts, saturated with information. An architecture that recognises that it is our experience of the world that is different and new. Not the hardware, and not the manipulation of abstract form. Architecture as media. Architecture as information for living in.

Modernist architecture is well served by its misleading moniker - which suggests that it was, is and will remain modern. We would say that it has never been. Will Hutton has argued that the decline in manufacturing and the rise in the service sector as sources of employment had begun some time before 1930.' Which were, of course, the halcyon days of unadulterated, capital-M Modernism. Architects, as ever, were a little behind the game. Modernism arose in the decaying tail end of the industrial revolution and, unsurprisingly, missed the yet-incomprehensible possibilities of the transmission from Cornwall to Canada, while Mackintosh, Perret and Wagner finished off the Scotland Street school, the rue de Ponthieu garage and the Post Office Savings Bank, respectively. The particular aesthetic, political and moral values of the Modernist social programme were built on a romanticised and ideologised historical period even at their emergence. They stumbled with the well-documented failure of social housing projects, while the communicative credo of Modernism's pure heroic aesthetics rode on into the age of turbo-capitalism. The new power of architecture and of architects is directly as part of the information revolution: communication, not programme.

Postscript

Just outside Piano, Illinois, Peter Palumbo may well have been engaged in the production of an unfitted artwork, whose meaning and ambitions may be as obscure as Stonehenge or the Freemasons. It is a mixed media piece about high Modernism, Cold War politics, international finance, the cream of twentieth-century fine art, society marriages, the British monarchy, patronage, heritage and air freight, regular flooding (the ominous symbol of global warming) and insurance claims. It is a piece of work about architecture, experience, narrative, about the real and virtual, about electronic communication, and about the best reality imaginable.

Glimpsed behind a Warhol Brillo box is a section of the Berlin Wall. The turret of the Mappin and Webb building is displayed by the gate like the head of a guilty medieval traitor. A letter from Margaret Thatcher hangs framed in the bathroom. Somewhere over the hill there is a K2 red phone box and a Royal Mail post box, reflected in the chrome body of an Airstream caravan.

As we all know, the Farnsworth House is a house that almost evaporates, a house that dematerialises. It's a house made with the sensation of being somewhere

else whilst being here. The house is architecture for a wireless age, connected to, and being in, multiple places. Palumbo's additions write this subtext in large expensive script across the Miesian canvas. These are CNN trophies: objects used to the flash of the paparazzo's camera, whose importance is measured in their appearance in newscasts and coffee-table books. Maybe photographed more (though not in this context, where photography is strictly forbidden) than the house itself, whose importance as an image in the world of architectural representation secured its place in the Modernist canon (while its client expressed a desire to move to some country where women went around covered from head to toe). While a million images circulate, these objects are the unique relics. Twentieth-century Turin shrouds and holy grails sitting quietly in the snow: the calm, smug centre of an electronic data storm.

Note

Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens (eds), *On the Edge* (London: Vintage/Ebury, 2001).