

Architecture and Contingency

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¹ William Rasch, *Niklas Luhmann's Modernity: The Paradoxes of Differentiation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) p. 52.

Contingency is, quite simply, the fact that things could be otherwise than they are.¹

The paper makes the argument that architecture is through and through a contingent discipline, but that architects have to a large extent attempted to deny this contingency through a retreat to notions of order, beauty and cleanliness. This stance can be traced from the first principles of Vitruvius, with his simplistic, but pervasive call for coherence, through to Le Corbusier, with his cry for architecture to be rid of contingent presences. Using the arguments of Zygmunt Bauman, it becomes clear that this rejection of contingency is not a trait of architecture alone, but of modernity as a whole. From this it is clear that the denial of contingency is not simply an issue of aesthetics and visual order, but a much wider one of social control and cultural cleansing. Whilst architects might acknowledge the former, they are less good at dealing with the latter. The paper consciously mixes the high with the low in its sources and style, in a very partial prompt that architecture needs to open up to such transgressions. It is, as a reviewer of the paper rightly said, a bit of a rollercoaster ride.

New Labour Vitruvius

I have always had a problem with Vitruvius, the Roman author of the first treatise on architecture. Just because he was first does not necessarily make him right, but his shadow over architecture remains long. ‘It is not too much to say,’ writes Kojin Karatani, ‘that (until the late 18C) the work of the architect was meant to fill in the margins of Vitruvian writing.’² In many ways the Vitruvian legacy has lasted beyond the late 18C. His triad of commodity, firmness and delight remains on the architectural rosary, even if the beads have been updated to reflect contemporary concerns with use/function, technology/tectonics and aesthetics/beauty. There is an uncritical, unthinking, acceptance of a baton being passed from century to century, a ‘solace in the prescription’.³ This is not to say that buildings should not be usable, stand up and generally be ‘delightful’ rather than miserable, but these qualities are so self-evident that they should be background beginnings rather than the foreground ends that the Vitruvian dogma suggests.

But my problem is not just with the blandness of the triad; it is more to do with the wider remit of the *Ten Books*. ‘I decided,’ Vitruvius writes with a certain immodesty, ‘that it would be a worthy and most useful thing to bring the whole body of this great discipline to complete order.’ The ambitious task of calling the discipline to complete order applies not just to the body of professionals – Vitruvius gives precise instructions as to what should be included in an architect’s education – but extends to the products of that discipline. ‘Architecture,’ he writes, ‘depends on *ordinatio*, the proper relation of parts of a work taken separately and the provision of proportions for overall symmetry.’⁴ Here we have the first conflation of the values of profession, practice and product that is to be repeated throughout architectural history: a prescription of order that applies equally to the knowledge of the profession, the structure of practice and the appearance of buildings.

As Indra McEwen convincingly shows, the dominating metaphor in the *Ten Books* is that of the body (‘the whole body of this great discipline’) and the defining feature of the body is its coherence and unity. ‘Bodies were wholes,’ she notes, ‘whose wholeness was, above all, a question of coherence. The agent of coherence — in the body of the world and in all the bodies in it — was *ratio*.’⁵ Right from the beginning, then, we get the identification of the architecture as an act of imposing order, of taking the unruly and making it coherent. However, this is not an aesthetic act alone in terms of *ratio* and symmetry. Vitruvius had greater ambitions than simply defining taste. ‘I realised,’ he writes in the preface directed to the Emperor Augustus, ‘that you had care not only for the common life of all

² Kojin Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor*, trans. Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. ix.

³ ‘It is not surprising that over the years many have found solace in the prescription “commodity, firmness, delight” as the clear account of what a building should incorporate leaving it to experienced designers and builders to interpret this within the tacit assumptions of a supposedly shared culture.’ Steven Groak, *The Idea of Building* (London: E & FN Spon, 1992), p. 54.

⁴ The Vitruvius quotes are from the translations in Indra Kagis McEwen, *Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 17, 65. The sections in Vitruvius are Book 4, Pref and 1.1.2. *Ordinatio* means literally ‘a setting in order’.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁶ Ibid., p. 38.

men and the regulation of the commonwealth, but also for the fitness of public buildings – that even as, through you, the city was increased with provinces, so public buildings were to provide eminent guarantees for the majesty of empire.’ McEwan brilliantly shows how this passage and others supporting it, indicate the wider pretensions of Vitruvius to tie his architectural approach into the imperial programme of expansion and authority: ‘it was not architecture as such that initially attached Vitruvius to Julius Caesar’s might. It was, rather, the connection of architecture to *imperium*.’⁶ What is happening here is that under the more-or-less benign cloak of aesthetic codes, Vitruvius is slipping in a distinctly non-benign association with social reform and imperial power. The term ‘ordering’ all too easily conflates the visual with the political. As I have said, just because he was first does not necessarily make him right but it certainly makes Vitruvius influential, because the mistaken (and dangerous) conflation of visual order with social order continues to this day, with profound ethical consequences.



⁷ Jeremy Till, ‘Too Many Ideas’ in *Research by Design* (Delft: Technical University Delft, 2001).

My second year lecture series is called Architecture and Ideas. The first lecture starts with a quote from a critic writing about the house that Sarah and I designed and live in. The critic writes: ‘It has too many ideas.’ This is not a compliment. In architecture, having too many ideas is a signal of confusion, whereas one idea rigorously carried through is a mark of order and control.⁷ Where in other disciplines having ideas is the lifeblood, in architecture they are edited. To illustrate this intellectual conundrum, I put up a slide with Vitruvius’s mantra on it. COMMODITY : FIRMNESS : DELIGHT. ‘How dumb is that?’ I ask. ‘How empty of ideas is that?’ Then, because the lecture is at the same time as the UK party political conferences, I add: ‘It is so bland, so commonsensical, that it could be the Tory conference mission statement,’ remembering when the Conservative party election manifesto was called ‘Time for Common Sense’. I got a complaint for that — something to do with political bias — so next year I changed it to the Labour conference mission statement just to see what would happen, and made an appropriately corporate slide to go with it. No complaints this time, suggesting that the Vitruvian triad is closer to the emollient spin of New Labour’s ordering centre.

Rogue Objects

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud famously identifies beauty, cleanliness and order as occupying ‘a special position among the requirements of civilization.’⁸ We have just identified the combination of beauty and order in the Vitruvian legacy. Cleanliness adds another dimension: it denotes purity, the removal of waste, whiteness. It is not for nothing, therefore, that modernist architectural beauty is so often associated with pure forms, elimination of decoration, and white walls.⁹ And it is not for nothing that this cleanliness is so often associated with some kind of moral order made possible by the actions of the architect/artist. This is a theme from Plato — ‘The first thing that our artists must do [...] is to wipe the slate of human society and human habits clean [...] after that the first step will be to sketch in the outline of the social system’¹⁰ — to Le Corbusier: ‘COAT OF WHITEWASH. We would perform a moral act: *to love purity!* ... whitewash is extremely moral.’¹¹ In the rush of words, we overlook the offensiveness of the association of visual purity with social morality.

The three terms, beauty, cleanliness and order form a triangle; in fact a Bermuda triangle that eliminates anything that might threaten its formal (and social) perfection. Thus alien objects, dirt, the low, the supposed immoral are cast aside in the pursuit of purity. If we return to the Vitruvian metaphor of the body, then it is clear that the triangle will only tolerate the classical body. In their seminal book on transgression, Stallybrass and White identify the classical body as the abiding symbol of high order: ‘the classical body was far more than an aesthetic standard or model. It structured [...] the characteristically “high” discourses of philosophy, statecraft, theology and law.’¹² The classical body signifies an ordered body of knowledge as well as an ordered system of form. The Vitruvian body, on which so much architecture still leans for support, is thus much more than a nice metaphor of coherence; it designates a ‘closed, homogeneous, monumental, centred and symmetrical system’.¹³

If the classical body (of architecture, of knowledge) is to be ordered, then it must also in metaphorical terms be healthy. ‘Order is the oldest concern of political philosophy,’ Susan Sontag writes in *Illness as Metaphor*, ‘and if it is plausible to compare the polis to an organism, then it is plausible to compare civil disorder with an illness.’¹⁴ Any sign of illness is a threat to order, and as Sontag makes all too clear, the ‘worst’ illness of all is cancer. She shows how illness, and in particular cancer, is often used as a metaphor to describe the malaise of society. ‘No specific political view seems to have a monopoly of this metaphor. Trotsky called Stalinism the cancer of Marxism’, the Gang of Four were called the ‘the cancer of

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 40.

⁹ See Mark Wigley’s exhaustive survey of whiteness, fashion and cleanliness in modern architecture: Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Section 501a of *The Republic*: Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 237.

¹¹ Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, trans. James Dunnett (London: Architectural Press, 1987), pp. 188, 92.

¹² Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 22.

¹³ Loc. cit.

¹⁴ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 76.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 84.¹⁶ Le Corbusier, *Précisions*, trans. Edith Schreiber Aujame (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 68.¹⁷ ‘The cancerous germ is coming up against the fine young, vigorous germ’, he writes of decadent art. ‘In biology, it is a dreadful disease, cancer, which kills by strangling’, of sensualists. ‘The dilemma is in the heart of the School [...] like cancer which establishes itself comfortably around the pylorus of the stomach, or around the heart. The cancer is in excellent health’, of Beaux Art academies. See respectively: Ibid., p. 32, Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, p. 207, Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White: A Journey to the Country of the Timid People*, trans. Francis Hyslop (London: Routledge, 1947), p. 116.¹⁸ Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals*, p. 50.¹⁹ Le Corbusier, *Précisions*, p. 172.²⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 31.²¹ All quotes from: Martin Parr and Nicholas Barker, *Signs of the Times* (Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications, 1992).

China’, and the ‘standard metaphor of Arab polemics [...] is that Israel is “a cancer in the heart of the Arab world.”¹⁵ For the person with cancer, this metaphor has the effect of casting them out as untouchable; cancer is seen as a kind of punishment. For society, the cancerous metaphor demands aggressive treatment in order for a cure to be effected. Cancer must be rid of for the healthy body to be re-established and so for order to be reconstructed.

And so when Le Corbusier declares in *Précisions*, that ‘to create architecture is to put into order,’¹⁶ it is no surprise to find that, at the same time, he likens the city (as the thing to be ordered) to a sick organism. Nor is it any surprise to note that the illness that Le Corbusier constantly evokes as metaphor for the sickness of the city, architecture, and the academy is cancer.¹⁷ If the ‘city has a biological life’¹⁸ which has been infected by illness, then order can only be effected through radical surgery; the primary care of medicine will not suffice: ‘*in city planning “medical” solutions are a delusion; they resolve nothing, they are very expensive. Surgical solutions resolve.*’¹⁹ Corbusier’s metaphor is telling. The stigma of sickness must be eradicated, cancerous elements cut out, if a fresh start is to be made. Only then can the quest for ordered perfection be initiated. The Bermuda triangle again: purity, cleanliness and order eliminating and excluding the rogue objects. ‘Orderly space is rule — governed space,’ Zygmunt Bauman writes, and ‘the rule is a rule in as far as it forbids and excludes.’²⁰

Some time ago there was a wonderful television series called ‘Sign of the Times’. In it the photographer Martin Parr and social commentator Nicholas Barker quietly observed the British in their homes. As the occupants talked about their design tastes, the camera froze on a single poignant feature, maybe a neo-rococo fireplace with gas flames (‘I think we are looking for a look that is established warm, comfortable, traditional’), maybe a faux antique candelabra (‘I’m put off real antiques because to me they look old and sort of spooky.’) Generally the effect was too gentle to be mocking, but at times the scene slipped into pathos. One such moment is set in a sparse modernist interior: A woman, voice choked with emotion, is lamenting that her husband will not allow her to have ‘normal’ things such as curtains: the camera dwells on expanses of glazing. When her husband Henry appears, he despairs of the ‘rogue objects’ disturbing his ordered interior. ‘To come home in the evening,’ he says, ‘and to find the kids have carried out their own form of anarchy is just about the last thing I can face.’²¹

The rogue objects are his children’s toys.

Henry is an architect.

Bauman's Order

Now is a good time to introduce Zygmunt Bauman. I came across Bauman in one of those moments of scavenging amongst footnotes, a happy accident of reading that brings what has been at the periphery of one's vision right to the centre. Of course, he should probably have been central all along: 'One of the world's leading social theorists,' reads the blurb on the book, and everyone that I now mention him to returns a pitying look as if to say: 'Where have you *beeeeen* (pinhead).' Everyone, that is, except architects and architectural theorists.²² This group tends to bypass the foothills of skirmishes with reality, and move towards the higher ground of battles with ideals (or their deconstruction), ignoring on the way Dewey's warning that the 'construction of ideals in general and their sentimental glorification is easy; the responsibilities of studious thought and action are shirked'.²³ There is an intellectual elitism at work here, with the supposedly superior status of philosophical thought being used to prop up the fragile constructions of architectural idea(l)s. Contemporary architectural theory is thus littered with references to philosophical texts with hardly a nod to current social theory. I suspect that architectural theorists have largely ignored Bauman's territory because it is too damn real. It reminds us too constantly of our own fragility, our bodies, our politics. It reminds us, crucially, of others and our responsibilities to them. In the realm of this sociology there is no room for autonomy, indeed the whole idea of architecture as an autonomous discipline would be treated with the disdain it deserves.

Bauman is too prolific a thinker and writer to summarise here. He has produced almost a book a year for the past fifteen years and I came to each new one with a mixture of dread and anticipation. Dread that my schedule was going to be knocked still further as I would have to take on board yet more ideas; anticipation that those ideas would, as they so often did, locate my small architectural world into a much wider social and political context. Bauman gave me confidence and for this I became an unabashed fan; maybe not the best way to write a book (academics are meant to assume an air of detachment), but at least you now know. Time and time again I would find Bauman articulating ideas that appeared to me to have parallels to, and implications for, architectural production.²⁴ It is not just that he directly addresses issues of contingency, but that he sees contingency as part of a wider condition of modernity, and so the argument that I was beginning to develop suddenly made sense in terms of its broader social and intellectual context.

Thus when Bauman refers to the 'surgical stance which throughout the modern age characterised the attitudes and policies of institutionalised

²² One of the few contemporary architectural theorists to acknowledge Bauman is Kim Dovey, who employs Bauman's concept of 'Liquid Modernity' in Kim Dovey, *Fluid Cities* (London: Routledge, 2005).

²³ John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), p. 268.

²⁴ Some commentators have noted that Bauman's daughter, Irena, is an architect and this may account for some of the architectural threads in his work. See Peter Beilharz (ed.), *The Bauman Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

²⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 99.

²⁶ Hilde Heynen's explanation of the difference between modernity (as a societal condition) and modernism (as an artistic and intellectual expression) is useful here: 'Modernity here is used in reference to a condition of living imposed upon individuals by the socio-economic process of modernisation. The experience of modernity involves a rupture with tradition and has a profound impact on ways of life and daily habits. The effects of this rupture are manifold. They are reflected in modernism, the body of artistic and intellectual ideas and movements that deal with the process of modernisation and with the experience of modernity.' Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 1. The terms are also explored in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), p. 16.

²⁷ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design, from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, Pelican Books (London: Penguin Books, 1975).

²⁸ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁰ Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, p. 192.

³¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pp. 41-43.

³² Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. xiii.

³³ i.e. in Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 30.

³⁴ From Zola, 'Les Squares'. As quoted in Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. xv.

powers,²⁵ we can begin to understand that Le Corbusier's excising proclamations are not just the rantings of a self-promoting polemicist but part of more general attitude. Le Corbusier is seen in the wider picture not as the inventor of modernism, but as an inevitable consequence of modernity.²⁶ He is a symptom not a cause. This simple truth comes as something of a shock to the inhabitants of the black box of architecture, brought up as they are on a determinist diet of cause and effect, in which architectural progress is announced in relation to previous architectural moments. Take for example the presumed baton passing of William Morris to Voysey to van de Velde to Mackintosh to Wright to Loos to Behrens to Gropius: these are Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, a sequence of falling dominos that creates the effect of a completely self-contained world.²⁷ When Marx says that 'men make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing,' I am sure that he did not mean to exclude architects, and yet so many of the standard texts of architectural history remain within the tramlines of a self-referential architectural world, ignoring the other circumstances that frame architectural production. Bauman and other social theorists allow us to see that what we may have assumed as an architectural necessity, is in fact contingent on a much more powerful pattern of circumstances; they lever us into an acknowledgment of the contingency of architecture. And so to repeat, just to shake the inhabitants from their reverie: Le Corbusier and the others are not a cause of modernism; they are symptoms of modernity.

In this light what is striking is the way that the principles of architectural modernism, fit the more general pattern of the will to order that Bauman identifies as a central feature of modernity. Of all the 'impossible tasks that modernity set itself [...] the task of order (more precisely and most importantly, of order as task) stands out'.²⁸ Thus Bauman's argument that 'the typically modern practice [...] is the effort to exterminate ambivalence,'²⁹ puts into context Le Corbusier's Law of Ripolin with its 'elimination of the equivocal'.³⁰ It is not just Le Corbusier who fits this pattern, though he is used by Bauman to illustrate certain tendencies in modernism as an expression of the condition of modernity.³¹ Bauman describes the modern age as one that has a 'vision of an orderly universe [...] the vision was of a hierarchical harmony reflected, as in a mirror, in the uncontested and incontestable pronouncements of reason'.³² In a striking metaphor, Bauman describes the modern state as a gardening state,³³ bringing the unruly, the chaotic and the fearful (as represented by nature) under the rule of order, regularity and control (as represented by the garden). It is a metaphor that chimes with Zola's caustic dismissal of a new public square in Paris: 'It looks like a bit of nature did something wrong and was put into prison.'³⁴ The ordering of space can thus be seen as

³⁵ The first approach is broadly that of Foucault, the second that of Lefebvre.

part of a much wider ordering of society. Depending on whose argument you follow, architects are mere pawns in an overwhelming regime of power and control, or else architects are active agents in the execution of this power and control.³⁵ Either way, they are firmly situated in the real conditions that modernity throws up and not to be seen in some idealised set-apart space.

³⁶ Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, p. xi.

There are two key, and interrelated, aspects of Bauman's analysis of modernity and its ordering tendencies. On the one hand he argues that the will to order arose out of a fear of disorder. 'The kind of society that, retrospectively, came to be called modern,' he writes, 'emerged out of the discovery that human order is vulnerable, contingent and devoid of reliable foundations. That discovery was shocking. The response to the shock was a dream and an effort to make order solid, obligatory and reliably founded.'³⁶ The important word here is 'dream'. The possibility of establishing order over and above the flux of modernity is an illusion. It is an illusion because of the second aspect of his argument, namely that to achieve order one has to eliminate the other of order, but the other of order can never be fully erased.

³⁷ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 7.

The struggle for order is not a fight of one definition against another, of one way of articulating reality against a competitive proposal. It is a fight of determination against ambiguity, of semantic precision against ambivalence, of transparency against obscurity, clarity against fuzziness. The other of order is not another order: chaos is its only alternative. The other of order is the miasma of the indeterminate and unpredictable. The other is the uncertainty, that source and archetype of all fear.³⁷

The gardener gets rid of weeds as part of the controlling of nature. As we shall see with architecture, as with any project of the modern age, the more one attempts to eliminate the other of the order, the more it comes back to haunt one. Weeds always come back. The whiter the wall, the quicker it succumbs to dirt. In their pursuit of an idea (and an ideal) of order, architects have to operate in a state of permanent denial of the residual power of the other of order.

³⁸ Ibid.

Order can thus only really exist as a form of knowledge from which will issue a series of abstracted procedures such as design, manipulation, management and engineering (these being core activities of the modern age for Bauman).³⁸ As a form of knowledge, order is subjected to the modern tests of truth and reason and in a self-legitimizing manner passes them with flying colours. Order is seen as rational and logical because it has been created out of the rules of reason and logic. Nietzsche is very clear about the limits of this closed circuit: 'if somebody hides a thing behind a bush, seeks it out and finds it in the self-same place, then there is not much to boast of respecting this seeking and finding; thus, however, matters stand with the pursuit of seeking and finding "truth" within the realm of reason.'³⁹ The tests of truth and reason are carried out in a sterile

³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Falsity in Their Extramoral Sense' in W. Shibles (ed.), *Essays on Metaphor* (Whitewater: The Language Press, 1972), p. 7.

⁴⁰ As quoted in Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 82.

⁴¹ Agnes Heller, 'From Hermeneutics in Social Science toward a Hermeneutics of Social Science', *Theory and Society* (18) (1989): 291.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 292.

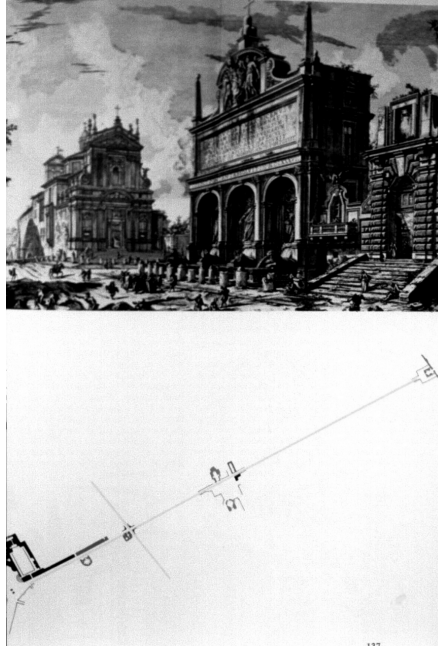
laboratory, doors sealed against the contaminations that the world would inflict. Herein lies the problem that is associated with the autonomy of architecture. 'Truth found inside a tightly sealed room,' as Lev Shevstov notes, 'is hardly of any use outside; judgements made inside a room which, for fear of draught is never aired, are blown away with the first gust of wind.'⁴⁰ Ideas developed away from the world may achieve a semblance of purity — of truth and reason — but this purity will always be tormented by the fact that the knowledge has arisen from within the world and eventually will have to return to the world. Agnes Heller summarises the paradox: 'One is confronted with the task of obtaining *true knowledge* about a *world*, whilst being aware that this knowledge is situated in that world.'⁴¹ Her solution gives no solace: 'in order to overcome this paradox an *Archimedean point outside contemporaneity* must be found. However, this is exactly what cannot be done: the prisonhouse of the present day only allows for illusory escape.'⁴² We are left with the illusion of order but closer inspection reveals that the underlying reality is rapidly unravelling that semblance.

Our architect Henry, the one who saw toys as rogue objects, clearly found architecture too unorderly and too unorderable, and so he stopped practising. Instead he set up a company that manufactures fireplaces, the Platonic Fireplace Company. He finds peace in the controllable gas flame playing over little stone cubes, spheres and pyramids in a semblance of order.

The Ridding of Contingency

In Edmund Bacon's classic work on town planning, *The Design of Cities*, the titles of the sections are explicit in summarising the ordering thrust of the argument. Passing through chapters entitled *Imposition of Order*, *Development of Order* and *Stirrings of a New Order* one arrives at a page that clearly presents the issues at stake.⁴³ On it there are two illustrations of Rome. At the top is one of Piranesi's *Vedute di Roma* etchings. The detail of drawing almost overwhelms one in its inclusion of low life, weather, fragments, mess, broken roads, event and vegetating cornices. Each time one looks at it one finds something new. Below is Bacon's interpretation of the same site. A few sparse colour-coded lines connecting up isolated monuments; all is understandable in a glance. One can almost sense Bacon's relief in making the drawing, in his ruthless editing of the contingent. Out of sight, out of mind. The world, emptied of uncertainty, is now controlled and controllable. Order all round.

⁴³ Edmund Bacon, *Design of Cities* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), p. 137.



Bacon's two drawings make explicit a general architectural tendency, that of ridding the world of contingency so as to better manipulate that world into (a semblance of) order. In a telling passage in *When the Cathedrals Were White* Le Corbusier is waiting at Bordeaux railway station and notes down what he sees: 'The station is disgusting. Not an employee on the crowded platform. An official with a gilded insignia does not know when the Paris train will arrive. At the office of the stationmaster they are evasive,

no one knows exactly. General uproar, offensive filthiness, the floor is black, broken up, the immense windows are black. At 9.00pm the express stops at platform no 4 completely cluttered with boxes of vegetables, fish, fruit, hats, returned empty bags.' This short description tells us all we need to know of Le Corbusier's fears, of his 'other'. Dirt, unruly crowds, broken time, inexact responses, damaged construction, the lack of white, and the contamination of categories (food with clothing). Chaos and transgression all around. But what is really revealing is that Le Corbusier then slyly hints as to why he is in Bordeaux station. He is on his way to Pessac, the new modern quarter that he has designed for Henry Frugès in the suburbs of Bordeaux. It is as if on his journey from the station to the suburb, Le Corbusier casts off the contingent presences and so arrives at Pessac cleansed. The buildings there are pure, ordered, clean, progressive — everything that Bordeaux station is not. He has accomplished 'the miracle of ineffable space [...] a boundless depth opens up (which) drives away contingent presences'.⁴⁴ Well, he has accomplished this in his head. Once he turns his back, as we shall see, things begin to unravel.

⁴⁴ Le Corbusier, *The Modulor*, trans. Peter De Francia and Anna Bostock (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 30.

It is important, however, not to see Bacon and Le Corbusier as fringe figures waging lonely wars against disorder. They are part of a much broader trend. If the will to order is an identifying feature of the modern project, then the means to that end lies in the elimination of the other of order; it lies in the ridding of contingency. For Bauman, contingency is the twin of order: 'Awareness of the world's contingency and the idea of order as the goal and the outcome of the practice of ordering were born together, as twins; perhaps even Siamese twins.' The reason is simple: one does not

⁴⁵ Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, p. xii.

⁴⁶ In Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, 22 b11 ff.

⁴⁷ 'In classical metaphysics contingency has always denoted a limitation of reason.' George di Giovanni, 'The Category of Contingency in Hegelian Logic' in Lawrence S. Stepelevich (ed.) *Selected Essays on G.W.F. Hegel* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), p. 42.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 141.

⁵⁰ di Giovanni, 'The Category of Contingency', p. 46.

⁵¹ Issues of contingency are discussed in *Science of Logic*, Vol. 1, Book2, Section 3, Chapter 2A. The quote is from G.W.F Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), p. 545.

⁵² 'Hegel always demanded specificity or what he called concreteness... Few philosophers have been so critical of the type of abstract claims that lack determinateness or specificity. This is the primary defect of knowledge that Hegel called understanding which is to be contrasted with the concrete determinate knowledge of reason (Verkunft).' Richard J. Bernstein, 'Why Hegel Now?' in *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), pp. 157-158.

⁵³ di Giovanni, 'The Category of Contingency', p. 56.

⁵⁴ Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

have the need for order unless one has experienced disorder, 'one does not conceive of regularity unless one is buffeted by the unexpected [...] Contingency was discovered together with the realisation that if one wants things and events to be regular, repeatable and predictable, one needs to do something about it; they won't be such on their own.'⁴⁵ And what one does is to act as the surgeon, separating the Siamese twins, knowing that one will probably be sacrificed so that the privileged one, the one with the better structure, can survive. Contingency cannot be tolerated in the modern project, be it architectural, political, social or philosophical.

Philosophically, contingency has been demeaned ever since the initial pairing by Aristotle of contingency with necessity.⁴⁶ As one of his modal categories, contingency becomes the 'not necessary', and in the history of ideas subsequently becomes associated with, at best, the 'limitation of reason'⁴⁷ or, at worst, with the other of reason, irrationality. If a contingent event is 'an element of reality impervious to full rationalisation,'⁴⁸ then it is not surprising that in the realm of reason, which typifies the modern project, the contingent event is dismissed as beneath the dignity of explanation. It is consistent therefore for a philosopher of reason such as Jürgen Habermas to talk of 'paralysing experiences with contingency.'⁴⁹

Contingency must be suppressed as a philosophical category if it is not to undermine the authority of reason. Probably the most subtle working of this argument is in Hegel. In order to achieve 'the essential task' of his *Science of Logic*, which is 'to overcome the contingency,'⁵⁰ Hegel first introduces the *need* for contingency, which he beautifully describes as the 'unity of actuality and possibility'.⁵¹ Contingency adds a certain concreteness to reality which avoids the pitfalls of abstracted thinking.⁵² 'For Hegel reality would not be self-sufficient if it did not contain its own irrationality.'⁵³ He therefore allows contingency to come to the surface in order to better push it down in the establishment of the rule of logic.

I introduce this philosophical interlude of the ridding of contingency not to show off, but as the polished intellectual tip of a much bigger iceberg. For Bauman modern times are 'an era of bitter and relentless war against ambivalence'.⁵⁴ His most intense example of the war on ambivalence is the Holocaust.⁵⁵ This genocide was the elimination of the other, but this terrible act was made possible, in the first instance, by the dehumanising of the world brought about by, among other factors, the suppression of ambivalence and contingency in the pursuit of a more ordered and 'progressive' society. Bauman's argument is that we should resist the temptation to identify the Holocaust as a one-off event, circumscribed

by its very 'Germanness' and the so-called Jewish problem. Nor should we believe that progressive and supposedly liberalising tendencies will banish the possibility of such genocide ever happening again. Instead we should see the Holocaust as a consequence of the patterns and processes of modernity, in particular the way that the modern world distances us from taking moral responsibility for our actions.

To go to the furthest shores of humanity (but shores that Bauman argues are maybe not that far from normal life after all) is to begin to understand that the war on ambivalence and the ridding of contingency are not benign processes. It might appear that the normalising pursuit of order, and certainty and order is self-evidently sensible. Surely the abolishment of uncertainty must mean that our lives are more certain? Surely the collective and measured agreement of morals is better than the subjective response of impulsive individuals? Surely it is better to share common goals than to promote fracturing contradictions? But in fact the normalising disguises a stealthy process of marginalisation of difference, as William Connolly so convincingly argues in his *Politics and Ambiguity*. 'The irony of a normalising democracy,' he writes, 'is that it [...] tends to be accompanied by the marginalisation of new sectors of the population or newly defined sectors of the self [...] and the suppression of this ambiguity tends to license the insidious extension of normalisation into new corners of life.'⁵⁶ What is normal to one group may be abnormal to another. The problem is that the definitions of the normal are controlled by the powerful and, as generations of feminists have reminded us, this leads to the suppression of various sectors of society under the guise of rational ordering. The ridding of contingency, in whatever field, thus inevitably brings political consequences with it, in so much it is predicated on the establishment of a certain set of values that smother the cacophony of different voices beneath; Le Corbusier's abhorrence of the 'general uproar' is the other side of his will to impose his value system. However, all is not lost, because the driving out of contingent presences is not the once and for all act that Le Corbusier and many others would have us believe.

⁵⁶ William Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), pp. 8-9.



I am on a visit to the McLaren headquarters designed by Norman Foster to house the production facilities, offices and associated spin-off companies of the Formula One racing group. Many people are saying that this is Foster's ideal project. A heady mix of technology transfer, undisclosed (i.e. huge) budget,

speed, minimal tolerances, vorsprung durch technik, male hormones and a client (Ron Dennis) who is famously perfectionist and famously demanding. There was a danger that he and Norman (who is thought to share these qualities) might clash, but they are now firm friends (the building is a success). The two even share the same birthday. How spooky is that? They make cars here, but do not think grease monkeys and porn calendars. Think white gloves sterile laboratories with sealed doors. I joke that the specification for the cleaning contract must be longer than that for the building contract, but am met with stony faces. Neither do I get many laughs either when a group of silhouetted muscles in black uniforms approach us and I ask if they have come off the production line as well. I was beginning to lose patience by then, a decline hastened by a remote control soap dispenser that had gone berserk and sprayed liquid soap over my expensive new shirt. It was not just my suppressed anger at the senseless waste of the whole operation, boys with toys in a sport that effectively sanctioned global warming. It was not just that the exhibited cars had a better view than the workers. It was more that there was something deeply disturbing about the silence, the absolute control and the regime of power that the architecture asserted. 'Don't the engineers mind being seen and watched?' I ask, referring to the huge windows that put the whole process on display. 'They get used to it,' comes the terse reply that for once eschews the techno-corporate spin used to justify the rest of the building ('Ronspeak' as petrolheads affectionately call it).

Counting Sheep



If Le Corbusier had returned to Pessac in 1964, he would have found a very different vision of modern life to the one he had left for the incoming tenants some thirty-five years before. Open terraces had been filled in.

Steel strip windows replaced with divided timber ones complete with vernacular shutters. Pitched roofs added over leaky flat ones. Stick on bricks, Moorish features, window cills and other forms of decoration applied over the original stripped walls. All in all a straightforward defilement of the master's guiding principles by an ungrateful, even unworthy, public. Or is it?

Philippe Boudon, in his meticulous documentation of the inhabitation of Pessac, argues that the combination of Le Corbusier's initial design and the inhabitants' irrepressible DIY tendencies, led to a certain inevitability that the purity of the original would be overwhelmed by the urges of everyday life. 'The fact of the matter,' writes Henri Lefebvre, the philosopher of the everyday, in his introduction to Boudon's book, 'is that in Pessac Le Corbusier produced a kind of architecture that lent itself to conversion and sculptural ornamentation [...] And what did the occupants add? Their needs.'⁵⁷

Their needs. As simple as that. In fact so simple as to make one wonder why a great philosopher should feel the need to note it. But it is necessary to state it with full philosophical force in order to acknowledge that architecture can never fully control the actions of users. In Architecture, as it wants to be, needs are cajoled into functions and thus subjected to normalising control. Functions (mathematical, scientific and linear) are, however, very different from needs (full as they are of desires, differences and life), and in the end of course the needs of the inhabitants at Pessac would well up to claim the architecture. The distance between functions and needs is just one of the many rifts that contribute to the gap between architecture as it wants to be and architecture as it is. I have already fallen foul of this gap in my use of just the architectural 'greats' and their writings to introduce my argument. I am effectively setting them up, better to make them fall into the gap. Clearly not all architects or architecture accord to the tenets of these greats, but to a large extent architectural culture has been shaped by them. So whilst it may be easy to parody these writings, I do it not out of mere dismissal, but in order to 'break up the ordered surfaces' that we might have taken for granted, and in so doing, more positively reconstruct alternatives.⁵⁸

The gap between architecture as described in these writings and architecture as it exists in time, partially arises out of the crucial mistake of confusing architecture as metaphor with architecture as reality. There is a long tradition of philosophers using the *figure* of the architect to denote rational authority. The '*architekton*' is used by Aristotle to illustrate the commanding relationship of theory and practice.⁵⁹ In the architect, Plato 'discovered a figure who under the aegis of "making" is able to withstand "becoming"'.⁶⁰ And, most forcefully, there is Descartes who argues 'that

⁵⁷ Philippe Boudon, *Lived-in Architecture*, trans. Gerald Onn (London: Lund Humphries, 1972), pp. i-ii. A visit in 2003 revealed that the changes documented by Boudon are now themselves being ripped out as the project is 'restored' back to its original state. Inevitably, many of the new inhabitants appeared to be architects or designers.

⁵⁸ I am absolutely aware that in the exploitation of this parody, I sometimes make sweeping generalisations; 'architecture' tends to stand for everyone when there are clearly architects operating out there who do not fit my description of the profession. However, I am trying to use parody knowingly. I do not simply employ it in its negative conception as a mocking dismissal of ludicrous or outmoded rituals. For more on the various ways in which parody has been used, both negatively and positively see Margaret Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 186-90. As she argues 'the restriction of parody to the more negative term in some modern or late-modern theories and uses has now been superseded by a "post-modern" understanding of both its complex meta-fictional and comic aspects (which) may mean that it will be given some even more complex and positive functions in the future.'

⁵⁹ For instance in the *Metaphysics*, Book III, Part 2 and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Part 4.

⁶⁰ Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor*, p. 6.

⁶¹ Descartes, *Discourse*, Part II, Paragraph 1.

buildings undertaken and completed by a single architect are usually more attractive and better planned than those which several have tried to patch up by adapting old walls built for different purposes [...] the latter of which [...] you would say it is chance rather than the will of man using reason that placed them so'.⁶¹ The banishment of chance, the authority of the individual, the triumph of the rational, the building of the new on cleared ground — these are identified by Descartes as the defining attributes of the architect, and so by analogy are then assumed as the attributes of the philosopher as rational subject. It is an alliance of mutual convenience. For the philosopher there is a necessity to reflect the metaphysical in the physical, because without the material world as grounding the immaterial remains just that — immaterial. So the analogous actions of the architect (as originator of stable constructions) serve as a useful source of legitimation for philosophical discourse. For the architect the reflection of the philosopher (and in particular the Cartesian philosopher of the rational) is a means of establishing authority through establishing a supposedly detached, objective knowledge base. And so the figure of architect/philosopher is created.

⁶² Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation 1, Paragraph 1.

In reading Descartes, one might assume that he is referring to the actual actions of the architect and thus that the figure of the architect/philosopher is based on some kind of worldly reality. It may be necessary for both sides to maintain at least an illusion of this reality — without this illusion the figure loses credence — but it is in fact a conceit. The figure of the architect/philosopher is simply a convenient metaphor. This is revealed most clearly in the relationship being constituted around the common use of language. The terms of architecture are used to underpin the foundations of metaphysics — to structure knowledge. Thus when Descartes begins the *First Meditation* with the words, 'to start again from the foundations',⁶² it is made clear that the new philosophy of reason is to be demonstrated in terms of a new construction. Later Heidegger will describe Kant's project in terms of the building trade, with Kant (as architect) laying the foundations from which the construction of metaphysics is projected as a building plan. Kant 'draws and sketches' reason's 'outline' whose 'essential moment' is the 'architectonic, the blueprint projected as the essential structure of pure reason.'⁶³

⁶³ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 2.

In these examples, and many others, the language of architecture is being used *metaphorically*. It is the apparent stability and the presumed logic of architecture that appeals to the foundational aspirations of traditional metaphysics, providing a form of legitimation for the construction of a philosophy. The power of this association is such that Heidegger can begin to effect a critique of Western metaphysics through an exposure of the weaknesses of its architectural metaphors. The architectural image of stability disguises an inherent weakness in metaphysics, which in fact

⁶⁴ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 93.

⁶⁵ Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, p. 39.

⁶⁶ Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor*, p. xxxii.

⁶⁷ One of the reviewers of this paper made some extremely perceptive comments. The first was that I had not framed what I meant by contingency so that ‘contingency might become anything – disorder, dirt, new empiricism, accidents, materiality, informe...’. The other was that in pairing contingency with order there is the danger ‘that their relationship is governed by a complex overdetermination’. Both of these points are right and, to some extent, I attempt to address them in my forthcoming book, *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), of which this paper is an early chapter.

⁶⁸ quoted in Franco Borsi, *Leon Battista Alberti*, trans. Rudolf Carpanini (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), p. 13. Borsi goes on to note that: ‘The nights of the fifteenth century were populated with images: Paolo di Dono lay awake at night thinking of “sweet perspective” and Leonardo was to praise ‘the straying of the imagination over the superficial features of forms when you lie in bed in the dark.’

is not built on *terra firma* but an abyss.⁶⁴ As Mark Wigley rightly notes, in this context ‘architecture is a cover and philosophy takes cover in architecture.’⁶⁵

This is not to suggest that architects actually read all this difficult stuff and thereby get a deluded sense of their own importance as the mirrors of rational thought. But it is to suggest that the metaphor of architecture as a stable authority is so powerful, as to make one believe that this is also the reality of architecture. The danger is not so much when philosophers come to believe in the myths that this metaphor promotes; it is when architects do. The Japanese philosopher Kojin Karatani argues that this has happened, ‘architecture as a metaphor dominated [...] even architecture itself [...]’⁶⁶ It is the *metaphorical* will to order *and no more than that*. We have already seen what happens when one starts to confuse the metaphorical for the real: the deluded belief that architecture can be autonomous; the resulting self-referentiality; the actual will to order; the concomitant suppression of the contingent. To criticise, as I have done, these aspects of architectural culture is to take easy pickings, like kicking a man when he is down, because such architectural culture conceived in all its purity can put up no resistance to the dirty realism of my boot. In the end what I am criticising is not really architecture, but a fiction of it — a fiction that is so powerful that we would all wish to believe it, but a fiction nonetheless. This pure stuff is not architecture, because architecture is to the core contingent.⁶⁷

In one of his early books, Della tranquillita dell’animo, the Renaissance architect and theorist Leon Battista Alberti recommends that to settle oneself in times of stress or anxiety one can find solace in architectural reverie: ‘and sometimes it has happened that not only have I grown calm in my restlessness of spirit, but I have thought of things most rare and memorable. Sometimes I have designed and built finely proportioned buildings in my mind ... and I have occupied myself with constructions of this kind until overcome with sleep.’⁶⁸ Normal people resort to counting sheep to get to sleep. Renaissance architects resort to architectural proportion. Sheep (for urban dwellers) and fine architecture both sit in that twilight zone between day and night, reality and dream — and when one wakes in the morning one is left with no more than a chimeric memory, revealing the perfection of form as a mirage never to be attained.
