visions unfolding: architecture in the age of electronic media
PETER EISENMAN

During the fifty years since the Second World War, a paradigm shift has taken place that should have profoundly affected architecture: this was the shift from the mechanical paradigm to the electronic one. This change can be simply understood by comparing the impact of the role of the human subject on such primary modes of reproduction as the photograph and the fax; the photograph within the mechanical paradigm, the fax within the electronic one. In photographic reproduction the subject still maintains a controlled interaction with the object. A photograph can be developed with more or less contrast, texture or clarity. The photograph can be said to remain in the control of human vision. The human subject thus retains its function as interpreter, a discursive function. With the fax, the subject is no longer called upon to interpret, for reproduction takes place without any control or adjustment. The fax also challenges the concept of originality. While in a photograph the original reproduction still retains a privileged value, in facsimile transmission the original remains intact but with no differentiating value since it is no longer sent. The mutual devaluation of both original and copy is not the only transformation affected by the electronic paradigm. The entire nature of what we have come to know as the reality of our world has been called into question by the invasion of media into everyday life. For reality always demanded that our vision be interpretive.

How have these developments affected architecture? Since architecture has traditionally housed value as well as fact, one would imagine that architecture would have been greatly transformed. But this is not the case, for architecture seems little changed at all. This in itself ought to warrant investigation, since architecture has traditionally been a bastion of what is considered to be reality. Metaphors such as house and home, bricks and mortar, foundations and shelter attest to architecture's role in defining what we consider to be real. Clearly, a change in the everyday concepts of reality should have had some effect on architecture. It did not, because the mechanical paradigm was the sine qua non of architecture; architecture was the visible manifestation of the overcoming of natural forces such as gravity and weather by mechanical means. Architecture not only overcame gravity, it was also the monument to that overcoming; it interpreted the value society placed on its vision.

The electronic paradigm directs a powerful challenge to architecture because it defines reality in terms of media and simulation; it values appearance over existence, what can be seen over what is. Not the seen as we formerly knew it, but rather a seeing that can no longer interpret. Media introduce fundamental ambiguities into how and what we see. Architecture has resisted this question because, since the importation and absorption of perspective by architectural space in the 15th century, architecture has been dominated by the mechanics of vision. Thus architecture assumes sight to be pre-eminent and also in some way natural to its own processes, not a thing to be questioned. It is precisely this traditional concept of sight that the electronic paradigm questions.

Sight is traditionally understood in terms of vision. When I use the term 'vision' I mean that particular characteristic of sight which attaches seeing to thinking, the eye to the mind. In architecture, vision refers to a particular category of perception linked to monocular perspectival vision. The monocular vision of the subject in architecture allows for all projections of space to be resolved on a single planimetric surface. It is therefore not surprising that perspective, with its abilities to define and reproduce the perception of depth on a two dimensional surface should find architecture a waiting and wanting vehicle. Nor is it surprising that architecture itself soon began to conform to this monocular, rationalising

vision — in its own body. Whatever the style, space was constituted as an understandable construction, organised around spatial elements such as axes, places, symmetries, etc. Perspective is even more virulent in architecture than in painting because of the imperious demands of the eye andthe body to orient itself in architectural space through processes of rational perspectival ordering. It was thus not without cause that Brunelleschi's invention of one-point perspective should correspond to a time when there was a paradigm shift from the theological and theocentric to the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric views of the world. Perspective became the vehicle by which anthropocentric vision crystallised itself in the architecture that followed this shift.

Brunelleschi's projection system, however, was deeper in its effect than all subsequent stylistic changes because it confirmed vision as the dominant discourse in architecture from the 16th century to the present. Thus, despite repeated changes in style from the Renaissance through Post Modernism, and despite many attempts to the contrary, the seeing human subject — monocular and anthropocentric — remains the primary discursive term of architecture.

In an essay entitled 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', Martin Jay notes that 'Baroque visual experience has a strongly tactile or haptic quality which prevents it from turning into the absolute ocular centrism of its Cartesian perspectivalist rival.' Norman Bryson, in his article 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field', introduces the idea of the gaze (le regard) as the looking back of the other. He discusses the gaze in terms of Sartre's intruder in Being and Nothingness or in terms of Lacan's concept of a darkness that cuts across the space of sight. Lacan also introduces the idea of a space looking back which he likens to a disturbance of the visual field of reason.

From time to time architecture has attempted to overcome its rationalising vision. If one takes for example the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, one can explain the solitary column almost blocking the entry or the incomplete groin vaulting as an attempt to signal a change from a Pagan to a Christian architecture.

Piranese created similar effects with his architectural projections. Piranese diffracted the monocular subject by creating perspectival visions with multiple vanishing points, so that there was no way of correlating what was seen into a unified whole. Equally, Cubism attempted to deflect the relationship between a monocular subject and the object. The subject could no longer put the painting into some meaningful structure through the use of perspective. Cubism used a non-monocular perspectival condition: it flattened objects on the edges, it overturned objects and it undermined the stability of the picture plane. Architecture attempted similar dislocations through constructivism and its own, albeit normalising, version of Cubism — the International Style. But this work only looked cubistic and modern, the subject remained rooted in a profound anthropocentric stability, comfortably upright and in place on a flat, tabular ground. While the object looked different, it failed to displace the viewing subject. Though the buildings were sometimes conceptualised by axonometric or isometric projection rather than by perspective, no consistent deflection of the subject was carried out. Yet Modernist sculpture did in many cases effect such a displacement of the subject. These dislocations were fundamental to Minimalism, the early work of Robert Morris, Michael Holzer and Robert Smithson. This historical project, however, was never taken up in architecture. The question now begs to be asked: why did architecture resist developments that were taking place in other disciplines? And further, why has the issue of vision never been properly problematised in architecture?

It might be said that architecture never adequately thought through the problem of vision because it remained within the concept of the subject and the four walls. Architecture, unlike any other discipline, concretes vision. The hierarchy inherent in all architectural space begins as a structure for the mind's eye. It is perhaps the idea of interiority as a hierarchy between inside and outside that causes architecture to conceptualise itself ever more comfortably and conservatively in vision. The interiority of architecture, more than any other discourse, defined a hierarchy of vision articulated by inside and outside. The fact that one is actually both inside and outside with architecture, unlike painting or music, required vision to conceptualise itself in this way. As long as architecture refuses to take up the problem of vision, it will remain within a Renaissance or Classical view of its discourse.

Now what would it mean for architecture to take up the problem of vision? Vision can be defined as essentially a way of organising space and elements in space. It is a way of looking at, and defining a relationship between, a subject and an object. Traditional architecture is structured so that any position occupied by a subject provides a means for understanding that position in relation to a particular spatial typology, such as a rotunda, a transept crossing, an axis, an entry. Any number of these typological conditionals deploys architecture as a screen for looking at.

The idea of 'looking back' begins to displace the anthropocentric subject. Looking back does not require the object to become a subject that is to anthropomorphise the object. Looking back concerns the possibility of detaching the subject from the rationalisation of space. In other words, to allow the subject to have a vision of space that no longer can be put together in the normalising, classicising or traditional construction of vision: an other space, where in fact the space 'looks back' at the subject. A possible first step in conceptualising this other space would be to detach what one sees from what one knows — the eye from the mind. A second step would be to inscribe space in such a way as to endow it with the possibility of looking back at the subject. All architecture can be said to be already inscribed. Windows, doors, beams and columns are a kind of inscription. These make architecture known and they reinforce vision. Since no space is uninscribed, we do not see a window without relating it to an idea of window; this kind of inscription seems not only natural but also necessary to architecture. In order to have a look back, it is necessary to rethink the idea of inscription. In the Baroque and Rococo such an inscription was in the plaster decoration that began to obscure the traditional form of functional inscription. This kind of 'decorative' description was thought too excessive when undefined by function. Architecture tends to resist this form of excess in a way that is unique amongst the arts, precisely because of the power and pervasive nature of functional inscription. The anomalous column at San Vitale inscribes space in a way that was, at the time, foreign to the eye. This is also true of the columns in the staircase at the Wexner Center. Most of such inscriptions are the result of design intention, the will of an authorial subjective expression, which then only reconstitutes vision as before. To dislocate vision might require an inscription that is the result of an outside text which is neither overly determined by design, expression or function. But how would such an inscription of an outside text translate into space? Suppose for a moment that architecture could be conceptualised as a Moebius strip, with an unbroken continuity between interior and exterior. What would this mean for vision? Gilles Deleuze has proposed just such a possible continuity with his idea of the fold. For Deleuze, folded space articulates a new relationship between vertical and horizontal, figure and ground, inside and out — all structures articulated by traditional vision. Unlike the space of classical vision, the idea of folded space denies framing in favour of a temporal modulation. The fold no longer privileges planimetric projection; instead there is a variable curvature. Deleuze's idea of folding is more radical than origami,

because it contains no narrative, linear sequence; rather, in terms of traditional vision it contains a quality of the unseen.

Folding changes the traditional space of vision. That is, it can be considered to be effective; it functions, it shelters, it is meaningful, it frames, it is aesthetic. Folding also constitutes a move from effective to affective space. Folding is not another subject expressionism, promiscuousness, but rather unfolds in space alongside its functioning and its meaning in space — it has what might be called an excessive condition or affect. Folding is a type of affective space, which concerns those aspects that are not associated with the affective, that are more than reason, meaning and function.

In order to change the relationship of perspectival projection to three-dimensional space it is necessary to change the relationship between project drawing and real space. This would mean that one would no longer be able to draw with any level of meaningfulness the space that is being projected. For example, when it is no longer possible to draw a line that stands for some scale relationship to another line in space, it has nothing to do with reason, of the connection of the mind to the eye. The deflection from that line in space means that there no longer exists a one-to-one scale correspondence. The fold presents the possibility of an alternative to the gridded space of the Cartesian order. The fold produces a dislocation of the dialectical distinction between figure and ground; in the process it animates what Gilles Deleuze calls a smooth space. Smooth space presents the possibility of overcoming or exceeding the grid. The grid remains in place and the four walls will always exist, but the folding of space in fact overtakes them. Here there is no longer one planimetric view, which is then extruded to provide a sectional space. Instead it is no longer possible to relate a vision of space in a two-dimensional drawing to the three-dimensional reality of a folded space. Drawing no longer has any scale value relationship to the three dimensional environment. This dislocation of the two-dimensional drawing from the three-dimensional reality also begins to dislocate vision. There are no longer grid datum planes for the upright individual. Alteka is not merely a surface architecture of a surface folding. Rather, the folds create an affective space, a dimension in the space that dislocates the discursive function of the human subject, and thus vision, and at the same moment, creates a condition of time - of an event in which there is the possibility of the environment looking back at the subject - the possibility of the gaze.

The gaze, according to Maurice Blanchot, is that possibility of seeing what remains covered up by vision. The gaze opens the possibility of seeing what Blanchot calls the light lying within darkness. It is not the light of the dialectic of light/ dark, but it is the light of an otherness, which lies hidden within presence. It is the capacity to see this otherness which is repressed by vision. The looking back, the gaze, exposes architecture to another light, one which could not have been seen before.

Architecture will continue to stand up, to deal with gravity, to have 'four walls'. But these four walls no longer need to be expressive of the mechanical paradigm. Rather they could deal with the possibility of these other discourses, the other affective senses of sound, touch and of that light lying within the darkness.