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*Real What?*

Few terms are as studiously avoided in progressive architectural discourse as *authenticity*. Loaded with conservative baggage and smacking of self-righteousness it runs counter to the pervasive instinct for ironic detachment. This avoidance, while historically justified, has the unfortunate consequence of suppressing some of architecture's most potent capabilities. What's needed today is a *post-ironic authenticity*; an approach that is mindful of the pitfalls of authenticity yet is willing to risk them in a new formulation.

There are those of us architects who like to believe that the careful development of architectural projects through technique and rigor is sufficient to ensure they achieve a measure of authenticity. Independent of its traditional associations, authenticity can be seen as a state in which the nature of a project's existence goes beyond being merely adequate to carry an appended intention and becomes, in itself, in concert with and explicative of the nature of things. Authenticity, in this sense, suggests a comprehensive handling of geometry and materials that permeates the tectonic expression of a building and raises it to the level of art. It suggests, too, a quality that transcends individual proclivities and stylistic trends. While few architects would assert that projects emerge independently from their historical moment, there is sometimes the possibility that timeliness can be engendered without explicit intention. Rather, that it comes about as a byproduct of the integrity of one's working method; an osmosis in which technique functions, in part, as a conduit for the *Zeitgeist*.

Experience gives credence to this belief. In architecture, *technique* - the manner in which one manipulates material conditions - develops as a form of intuitive intelligence that subsumes a range of conditions and goals without articulating them explicitly. Both a project's authenticity and its contemporary relevance are, in no small measure, accomplished purely through the rigor of work. Experience, however, also presents a disturbing paradox: Why is it that at times, in projects that exhibit a mastery of technique, we sense that their very quality of authenticity is their shortcoming, retarding insight and fumbling relevancy? Why is the rigor that ought to be a project's greatest strength instead its flaw?

This dilemma occurred to me on a recent trip to Southern California after touring both Louis Kahn's Salk Institute and Raphael Moneo's Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral. Separated by forty years, the deep tectonic expression of both of these remarkable projects posits a challenge to hasty and insubstantial architecture. Both projects, though contemporary in form, rely on traditional formulations of tectonic expression: the use of materials that are not only relatively permanent but also traditionally understood to be so, a clear expression of those materials in the final work, an articulated expression of structure and building subassemblies. In both —albeit with different aims and with widely divergent sensibilities— it is

the tectonic presence of the building itself that creates the strongest effect. Nonetheless, the seriousness with which these projects approach tectonics struck me as odd, even moralistic; positing a world that doesn't square with contemporary sensibilities. The authenticity came to feel like the appearance of authenticity and where I sought insight I only found nostalgia. While it's easy to dismiss this dissatisfaction as a deficiency in the viewer – a corruption caused either by a creeping cynicism or by an undue obsession with trends – I believe it points instead to a problem with the works themselves.

Authenticity may be essential to architecture's capacity to create resonant and integral constructions, but there is nothing to suggest that it requires a traditional expression. The association made between authenticity and traditional tectonic expression is an unfortunate legacy of postmodernism—an effort to recuperate a condition in which resonance and integrity were givens rather than questions. This is the source of the nostalgia and it is the reason why Kahn's Salk can be seen as an early salvo in post-modernism and Moneo's Cathedral a late one. The paradox of authenticity presented by these projects highlights not so much the limits of technique as it does a contemporary condition in which technique participates in its own undoing. Our culture's relationship to authenticity, in general, has become problematic, and with it our receptivity to traditional tectonic expression is compromised. Steeped in irony, we have come to suspect that any attempt at authenticity is either duplicitous or inexcusably naïve.

This is tricky terrain. The shortcomings addressed are only relevant when observed in highly accomplished works of architecture such as Salk and the Los Angeles Cathedral; works in which technique is practiced with a degree of expertise that is above reproach. What is noted here is not a failure of talent, rather it is a subtle yet fundamental miscalibration in timbre; a miscalibration that can cause a project to resonate in unintended ways.\* Today, relying on traditional formulations of authenticity causes work to appear inauthentic or, at best, quixotic with an aura that may be poignant, but is never radical. For architects that are unwilling to capitulate architecture's capacity to create resonant and integral constructions this is a disturbing dilemma. We find ourselves striving to perfect our craft yet observe that it is insufficient, seeing extrinsic factors undermine our work.

Herakleitos observed that “one cannot step twice into the same river, for the water into which you first stepped has flowed on.” The shape and sense of the world changes and every work must, as part of its conception, negotiate its entrance into the world. Creative work is both a mediation and a meditation; as much inflected by this stochastic flow as by the author's craft. While authenticity has the quality of timelessness, it is also bound to contemporary relevance. As a result, projects that fail to slip accurately into their temporal context lose some degree of authenticity. The context of our time is strongly shaped by irony, altering the sense of a work and causing certain features, no matter how well executed, to fall flat. Authenticity is a casualty of irony, rendering entire regions of tectonic expression unusable.

The rise of the ironic posture is well known. Confronted with the self-reinforcing mechanisms of power characteristic of late modernism, irony became a subversive tool for creative survival; a necessary refuge for our sanity and a weapon of resistance. Importantly for architects, it provided new means to negotiate a relationship to power. However, as irony matured from a subversive tool to a reflexive posture, its power to deflate proved effective against more than just the duplicitous agents of hegemonic control; it also came to incapacitate creative work by subjecting the quest for authenticity to ridicule.

There's a growing sense that it's time to hazard authenticity again. The newfound vigor with which progressive architects are embracing practice presses this issue. It's not that either the ironic reflex or the mechanisms of power have become sufficiently relaxed to allow guileless craft to proceed unmolested. Rather, it's that a hunger for depth impels us to pursue a post-ironic authenticity in spite of the pitfalls.

Authenticity as a goal is not the problem. Rather, arriving at a contemporary formulation of authenticity is what proves perversely difficult to achieve. The key to a post-ironic practice is, I believe, to reexamine the nature and potential of technique; not to jettison it but to loosen it from its traditional expressions and media. If, in the past, the rigor of technique led naturally to a certain sense of tectonic expression, today it must consciously point away from it. Technique, at its most expansive, is a probative tool capable of configuring geometries and materials in new relationships. Traditional tectonic expression is only a subcategory of this capability, albeit a historically important one. New technique requires a working method that strategically maneuvers between projection and immanence. Postmodernism's discovery of an autonomous existence for architectural drawings can now be expanded and employed in a technique that works across media, exploring material conditions and configurations that defy tectonic conventions and blur the line between process and product.

A post-ironic practice must operate with the awareness that authenticity is continuously subsumed by a caricature of itself. It requires a practice willing to rid itself of some of its own best methods and surest techniques. We strategically ask a brick what it wants to be to avoid being ensnared by that image. It requires a technique that is nimble enough to be practiced experimentally - independent of traditional categories of drawing, material assembly, or tectonic expression yet confident of its own timeless efficaciousness. Conscientious application of craft is still a necessary condition for authenticity, but it's not, at present, a sufficient condition. It can no longer simply be left to an implicit intuition; today it requires the self-conscious expansion of tectonic expression into unfamiliar territory.

It's unclear what form authenticity takes in a post-ironic practice. It's not, as some suggest, simply a matter of embracing the potential of new technology. Adopting the traditional notion that technological progress determines architectural form produces work that is as quickly subsumed by its own image as is the arch and architrave. Emerging technologies should be viewed as part of an expanding palate — an important component of new technique — but not as a self-justified formal and tectonic imperative.

What we need is a stealth authenticity: architecture that requires deep expertise, yet is careful not to express it. Perhaps, like Jeffrey Kipnis's "tabloid transparency," work today needs a wily strategy; an outer shell of ease or awkwardness, error or banality (but not kitsch) that simultaneously shields it from the ironic reflex yet is deliberately shallow enough to allow a more penetrating gaze. In this way, rather than being the overt theme of architecture, authenticity becomes a latent quality, present despite appearances to the contrary.

\* Of Moneo's work I refer here specifically to the interior of the Cathedral. The project as a whole presents a fascinating set of divergent conditions. One aspect of the exterior, in fact, presents a counterpoint to my observations. The wall of alabaster, facing the Hollywood Freeway is, in my view, a transcendent new icon for Los Angeles. Lit from within at night, viewed from the freeway, it is simultaneously of our time and startlingly archaic: a billboard become space – canted, and deep, and suspended within its depth, disturbing particulates.