

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2009)

Heft: 15

Artikel: The post-indexical criticality

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-918926>

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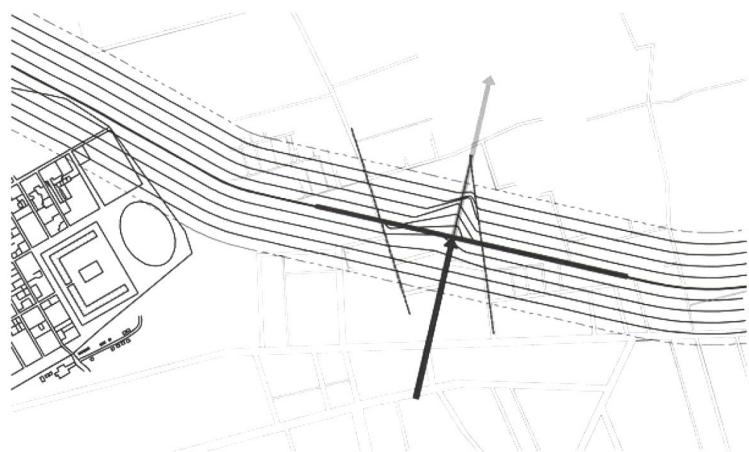
The Post-Indexical Criticality

Many years ago, Walter Benjamin said that people view architecture in a state of distraction.¹ Perhaps today, in one sense, that statement has come true. However, the history of architecture would belie this impression, as it is a history that is based on another interpretation, that of necessary close attention or close reading. Today, there are two conditions that face the user, the reader, or what I call the subject of architecture, which make it necessary to question that former history. First, architecture seems to be no longer an object of close attention, that is, it has become very much like media: it is about image, sound byte, branding, etc. The spectrum of this perception has narrowed and has little tolerance for the possibility of close reading. Second, even if such a close reading were possible, the presumed idea of the part-to-whole relationship first proposed by Alberti – “a house is a small city, a city is a large house” – is no longer operative. The whole is no longer either more or less than the sum of its parts; these entities have little to do with one another. Thus, the object of architecture has changed because the subject, that is students, clients, critics, etc., have changed. There is a new generic subject, who inundated by media, information, images, etc. has less motivation for other, more interpretative, kinds of information. It is not that the subject cannot understand or close read an architectural object; rather it is that the subject does not have the means to bridge the gap between the discipline of architecture as it was known in the past and its present incarnations.

The discipline of architecture is made up of what can be called persistencies, that is, such things as part-to-whole unitary relationships, figure-ground, conventions which have become orthodoxies, almost natural things that remain constant over time. At the same time, architecture as a critical instrument has evolved through challenging these persistencies. Those persistencies that in their particular time have become orthodoxies, have been the focus of these challenges. In the past, these challenges were often interpreted as stylistic changes. The problem today is to understand the difference between those persistencies which still have a relevance and those which have become clichés. This problem exists partly because the context has changed – what and how the subject reads and what the subject deploys to be read. In short, the subject–object relationships have modified, and thus the strategies for their interaction will, of necessity change, as will the nature of reading in particular. This then demands a rethinking of the conditions of the object.

My previous work attempted to give a priority to reading as opposed to the visual image by proposing the idea of the index. This assumed a certain capacity on the part of the subject for close reading while at the same time attempting to lessen the importance of spectacular imagery. The process, which included the traces, codes, and other reading strategies, could be understood as part of

¹ Walter Benjamin, 1968.



the affective experience of the architecture. However, the mediated context that is now so totalizing of experience makes it necessary to rethink these ideas of reading and writing. What follows begins to suggest a strategy which can be called, for lack of a better term, the post-indexical.

It presumes another subject/reader and thus another idea of object and how the object is written. It is possible to define three different historical moments of the subject: Brunelleschi, Alberti, etc., defined the moment of the immanent metaphysical subject. Next there was a post-Piranesian, post-French revolutionary collective subject, who existed between the late 18th century and the middle of the 19th century and represents the modern subject. The present era embodies a subject first articulated around 1968; it is a mediated subject, a subject of information and images, a subject that architects seem not yet to fully understand; it is the subject of the spectacle.

The post-indexical first concerns another form of reading, a text which is both present but not legible or understandable but neither an icon nor an image. The post-indexical concerns the possibility of frustrating a reading for information; its search is for figures, which are neither indices nor represent or illustrate personal expression. The reader understands there is some form of language that is present in the object, that it is not merely jibberish, but nevertheless is some form of language that one does not know. Formerly, a project that wanted to be legible also had its bases in the possibility of legibility. This was the case with coded projects. However, once the code was broken, the object could be read. Here, while there seems to be a code in the multiple overlays, these overlays are not the end product. There is a sense that there is no code to be broken, that any attempt at understanding would ultimately be frustrated. Instead, a new condition of figure is produced out of what can be the erasure of the coded traces, the previous indexical marks. These figures produce neither an active reader nor a passive reader who basks in the glow of information. Rather, these figures address another state of the subject, the non-passive passive, or the radically passive, a subject who is neither an active reader searching for information, nor a passive reader being fed predigested pap.

Such a proposal must begin of necessity with the nature of another process of the diagram. While my earlier diagrams could be seen in such a way as to transfer the diagram into architecture and subsequently that the architecture could be read back to the diagram, these diagrams do not have such an isometric relationship, whereas the diagram and the building were never one and the same; the diagram was not iconic, that is, it did not have a visual, imageable similitude, a sameness between object and diagram, nevertheless a palpable relationship existed between the two. Now, there is a different, more occluded relationship that has different objectives, most importantly its illegibility. The

Eisenman Architects, *project for a train station, Pompeii, groundplan, 2006.*



Figure 1, Eisenman Architects, *project for a train station*, Pompeii, diagram drawing, 2006.

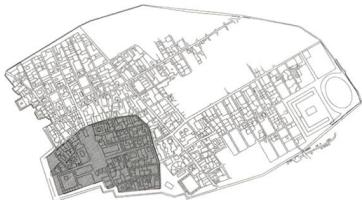


Figure 2, Eisenman Architects, *project for a train station*, Pompeii, diagram drawing, 2006.

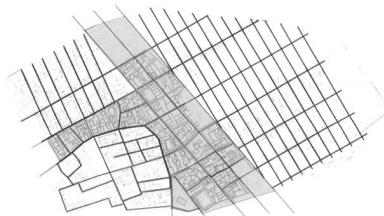


Figure 3, Eisenman Architects, *project for a train station*, Pompeii, diagram drawing, 2006.

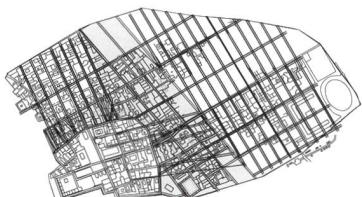


Figure 4, Eisenman Architects, *project for a train station*, Pompeii, diagram drawing, 2006.

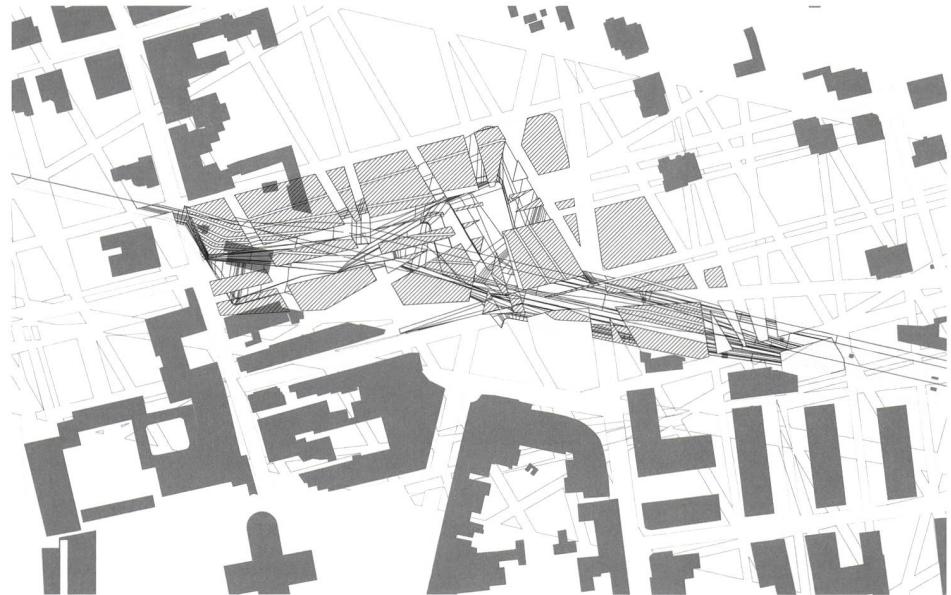


Figure 5, Eisenman Architects, *project for a train station*, Pompeii, diagram model, 2006.

crucial moment is a third step, which is introduced into the design process, which is the idea of erasure. This has the effect of gradually distancing the architectural object from the diagram, as well as from any legibility.

The particular invocation of this strategy occurs in a project for two railroad stations on either side of the ruined city of Pompeii. The idea is to produce a *percorso* from the first station, the Stazione Scavi, then to walk through the ruins to the arena and exit to the Santuario station, returning from there to Napoli. Thus the beginning and end of the experience are flanked by these two stations. The new stations neither look like ancient ruins nor modern ruins or any other associated image. Instead the two stations are connected through an idea of a whole of three dissimilar parts, analogous to the three parts of the ruins itself. The first diagrams evolved out of an analysis of the existing ruins. The first urban foundation, in the history of Pompeii was either Greek or Etruscan in origin and had different formal characteristics than the later Roman city. The Roman city has a regular grid with a cardo and decumanus. Most importantly, there is also an interstitial zone between the regular grid of the Roman city and the irregular Greek city that has characteristics of both. Thus, Pompeii is a three-part city: an early foundation, a later condition, and an in between condition. Since a railroad station is in a sense also an interstitial space, that is, an infrastructure which runs between two conditions, the idea was to first create an analogous three-part condition on the site of the second station, not formally but conceptually similar to the three-part city of Pompeii. The first index projected the Roman city into the Greek and then the Greek city into the interstitial space in order to create both an analogous zone and an analogous process for the design of the stations in the actual sites. These projections show two different attitudes to recording traces. The first is a direct extension, an index of the superposition of the conceptual on the real. This is accomplished by projecting both street patterns from the Greek and Roman ruins onto the interstitial zone. The second is a figural result, which to a large extent erases the traces of the former process, demanding another way of reading what can be called the figural deviations from the, what can be called, linear track ideal.

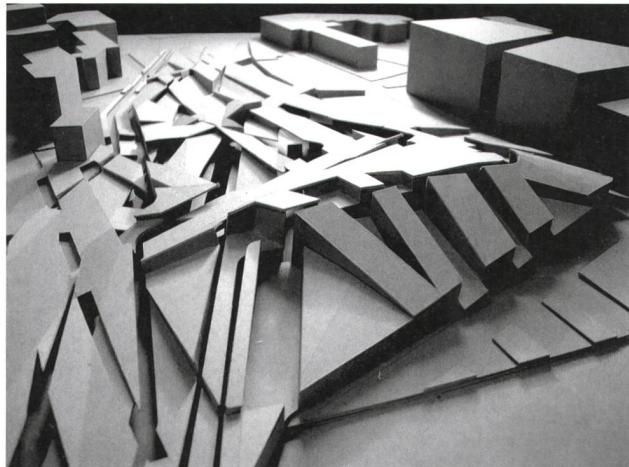
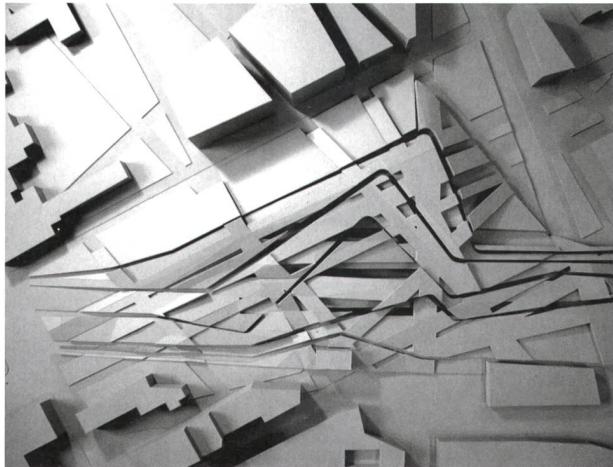
A deviation registers a shift from an axial geometry to a vectoral or force condition of geometry. Indexical diagrams model the axes of a previous geometry, and the deviational or figural diagrams attempt to model the forces that deviate



from axial geometry. In the first drawing it is very clear what the diagram is; anyone can read it (Fig 1). In the second drawing, the deviations seem purely expressionistic, romantic, pure will (Fig 2). The figures do not look like they come from any a priori strategy or diagram. The grids from the agricultural zone and the urban zone to the north and south of the station are projected onto the interstitial zone of the station, initially as a clear index (Fig 3). At the same time, a cardo and decumanus are projected onto the existing site (Fig 4). The grid from the urban area is blocked by the interstitial zone, it does not continue into the rural zone (Fig 5). Since it was the interstitial area between the Etruscan city and the Roman grid, which was the most figural, it was assumed that the interstitial zone of the railroad would exhibit the same characteristics. The idea was to find something that looked random and unreadable that could be extrapolated from previous readings, to produce, from the indexical superposition, a reading of the figurative condition. This idea is clearly different from the previous process of indexical work because a figure is produced, which is neither an index nor an image, but more important, it cannot be read back to either of those conditions. From the grid diagrams, figures were produced as a residue by an erasure of the indexical traces as self-contained fragments. Thus, in the voids between these lines new figural objects appear, neither arbitrary nor rational but some other state. This is the beginning of a reading of a movement from the indexical diagrams to the specific figural deviations from the diagram. Initially, deviations are registered as both lines and voids, but with the erasure of the lines, the voids take on a different significance. The lines are clearly indexical, the voids figural. The search was for different manifestations of the void that will produce a condition of figure that cannot be read back as the end product of a narrative or as an index of a process. Clearly, there are different variations of these figural diagrams possible, depending on the nature of the erasure; each variation is an attempt to reduce the indexical factor, that is, the legibility of the diagram, from an indexical to a figural quality. It is important in this context to understand the role of the deviations, which produce voids with figural content.

Since the railroad is straight as it passes through the station site, any straight grid line in this zone would be read as an index of its function. The registration of deviations, the resultant of gridded vectors that impact the site, does not allow such a reading. When the record of deviations becomes stronger

Eisenman Architects, *project for a train station, Pompeii, groundplan, 2006*.



Eisenman Architects, *project for a train station, Pompeii*, models, 2006.

than the indices, and when the structure of deviations begins to read as a base in itself, then there is the possibility of what is being called here post-indexicality. The deviations extrapolated from the diagram become illegible fragments. Thus to cancel the linearity of the line becomes a third but important step in the process. It is not that the tracks deviate, but that the entire complex of the station is read as an integral deviation. It is only when the initial structure of the gridding is erased so that the deviations become figure in themselves and not deviations from a diagram, that the project moves toward its objective. The idea is to produce figures, which are not clichés, in that they cannot be read as representations of some other object, but things in themselves. The attempt is to join an indexical process with a figural process that allows for the production of a figure, which is neither a form nor a shape as traditionally understood. The result becomes some other figure that speaks of neither function, meaning, nor image; in other words, it exists in purely architectural terms.

The primitive nature of the project represents the first time in my work that an indexical strategy has been conceptualized to produce both the persistencies of architecture, that is, its figuration as deviations from a Cartesian or axial geometry, as well as a critique of these persistencies. This, in a sense, is what is meant by the term post-indexical, the shift from indices of axial geometry to force conditions, which at the same time have the persistencies of architectural figures like symmetry and deep space conventions.

In this particular project it is fortunate that there is a Roman grid, as it becomes a starting point for the diagram. The question is, at what point do the deviations overcome the process of deviating and become a figure totally unrecognizable as some deviation, that is, they become their own figure. When the deviations become a figure of their own, when they lose the notion of deviation, they return to mere forms of expression. So each deviation must maintain that edge between deviation and the production of a figure that is like any other figure. This idea of a between condition – neither an index nor any other critical form – is that of post-indexicality, which, as it is argued here, produces an architectural object that is perhaps more appropriate to today's subject and reader.

Peter Eisenman lives and works in New York as head of the office Eisenman Architects. He teaches as Professor at Yale University in New Haven and at The Cooper Union in New York City.