AGILE ARCHITECTURE AND THE AGENCY OF RELATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS
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Agile: **The ability to adapt**
Architecture: **Immersive space**
Agency: **The capacity to change and act upon the world**
Relational Environments: **Spaces that elicit new perceptions by revealing the relativity of experience**

The unprecedented scale of destruction during World War II shed a grim light upon the darker prospects of humanity. The two World Wars and ensuing calamities, the Cold War, McCarthyism and the Vietnam War, cumulatively contributed to the increasing distrust in institutions, authority and doctrine. Disenchantment, motivated as a political response, in turn prompted a search for new directions in individual purpose and social goals. It was during this postwar era that a complex task emerged: to give a new common objective to cultural movements. The rejection of the authoritarian resulted in a watershed in Western thought: the rejection of the authorial voice. The belief in universal meaning and immutable truth gave way to the recognition of heterogeneity and impermanence. Roland Barthes' 1967 essay, Death of the Author, pronounced a new way of looking at literature that shifted the critical focus of text from source to audience: from the author's intentions to the reader's interpretation. The diminution of the authorial voice permeated artistic practice and engendered a variety of formal responses.

The Gordian knot was: what is to become of the author and his intentions? How were literature and other creative work going to be reformed to the ideal of the enlightened reader? And, how was this enlightened reader going to become fluent in the new forms of artistic production?

In architecture, the discourse has largely focused on the procedures that generate structures seemingly without authorial intent. Process was the emphasis in Peter Eisenman's axonometric transformations, Rem Koolhaas' programmatic diagrams, and Bernard Tschumi's Screenplays and Transcripts. It still dominates much of the current dialogue on architectural research and algorithmic architecture. This essay considers an alternate approach within the same discourse: to shift the focus from the death of the author to the birth of the reader. It makes a case to look at the same oeuvre afresh: inspecting the built works and their independent merits based on how they relate to the user, his newfound awareness and empowered role.

Artistic production, now challenged to engage the audience, moves from investigating the universal to exploring subjectivity. To do so, it needs to take on a malleable state that can be purposed in multiple ways by divergent interests. It is agile; work is open to appropriation and reconfigurable independently or in conjunction with other work. The adaptation could be in the form of physical change or in the immaterial form of thoughts and interpretations.

Architecture that examined corporeal forms of open systems already exists: multiple groups from the fifties to the seventies considered architecture as pure structure. Metabolists abandoned prescribed function and explored flexibility in modular structures. Team X and its progeny, New Brutalism and Structuralism, used structural form to organize social relationships. In London, Archigram envisioned technocratic cities in exuberant renderings of machine-like mega-structures. Superstudio, based in Italy, replaced architecture with infrastructure.

Ultimately, the works of these architects were delegates instead of expediters, conveying the aspirations without realizing them. The structures conveyed the aspirations without fully realizing them. For example, Kisho Kurokawa's Metabolist ideals of flexibility in the Nagakin Capsule did not translate to the interior which was comprised of fixed, over-designed and cramped self-similar units. It was a new vision of mobility, an alternative form of housing for businessmen working long hours in Tokyo. Allegedly, it offered an alternative, but fundamentally it was a device with which the Japanese man could fit more comfortably into his society's ethic of hard-work.

This formal exploration, while influential, did not last because such work, without provoked, engaged and empowered users, was useless. This consideration exposes the work of the last half century to a new series of quandaries. The death of the author ends with the birth of the reader who is assigned a greater creative role. If the reader is not privy to his role, the task is incomplete. In more holistic terms, this is a tripartite problem. The author and the work aside, how is the user going to become literate in these new forms of architecture?

Other disciplines have bearing on the case of the Barthesian reader. Resonant across practices, the transfer of creative license to the user was a shared experiment. It bridged fields from music (John Cage's 4'33") to urbanism (the Situationist dérive), from film (Hans Richter's Rhythmus 21) to sculpture (Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's Light Space Modulator). A common objective was to create circumstances that would provoke participation and therefore break down the division between artist and audience. These experiences discharged the audience from the norms of thought and social interaction, and were perhaps intended to inspire such consciousness and open-minded thinking beyond the crucible of the orchestrated moment.

Neither art nor performance, architecture, so embedded in daily life, needs to find its own way to inspire, incubate and support the free and proactive citizen. Means of user-engagement can be utilized to open individual perception to the malleable properties of the environment and to motivate action upon them.

Since the late sixties, some architectural projects have restructured spatial relationships. They upset the perfunctory use of space, with psychological, social and physical implications. The relinquishment of traditional forms

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allowed form and function to relate in new ways. Intentional or not, this introduced new spatial qualities that affected the psyche. Peter Eisenman's abstract house series, entirely devoid of any attention to functionality and of any regard to inhabitation, is a contemporary tabula rasa: an undomesticated space for inhabitants to make sense, make work, or do without. The lack of convention allows the occupant to reevaluate lifestyles and inhabit space in his own way. Bernard Tschumi rehashed program and circulation to revise and invent social encounters and interactions. Rem Koolhaas' subversion of programmatic organization has a similar effect, but with an extreme departure from formal propriety. Diller Scofidio + Renfro's work, generally focused on the aberrant, consistently aims to disrupt routinized perception. The unconventional integration of media, space and landscape conflate interior, exterior and virtual spaces into one. Projects such as in the Arbores Laetae (Joyful Trees) installation at the Liverpool Biennial and the BlurBuilding in Yverdon-les-Bains extended the limits of experiential and adaptable space.

Like the work of the mid-twentieth century avant-garde artists, these projects successfully expanded the lexicon of human experience and relations. And while the work, by altering perception, successfully opened a new discussion on what space is and how it can be shaped, each of the built projects seriously limited how the occupants could participate. Ultimately, these experiments have become a discordant collection of one-offs, the icons of an era that rejected icons. Perhaps it was because of the singularity of each exploration that the resulting projects were too stylistically or aesthetically novel. In isolation and without many accomplices, the work could be seen as esoteric architectural objects. Designing for difference, choice and change treads a thin formal line between the overly fantastical and the generic. It is difficult to make a bold statement about being indeterminate. At the other end of the spectrum, system design is dangerously close to being too passive and apolitical. Without overly absolute ideals and without the already-inspired and self-sufficient user, soap box structures lose their sociopolitical relevance. Regardless of intent, it is easy to slip into the business of spectacle, style and luxury.

The contemporary condition makes it clear that nothing is certain. The pace of change, now shifted from the mechanical to the relentless electronic flow, has left multiple wrinkles in history. Technology and globalization have mapped and remapped the world many times over. Boundaries are fuzzy. Paradigms now need to account for rapid change, relational conditions and the multivalent quality of space and time. Manhattanism is rampant. Conditions are in constant flux and ideas are both mobile and malleable. Designed or not, the world is now an intricate, interrelated system: a network of relations rather than a series of

independent, disconnected entities. We cannot afford to be apathetic. The tools that have been prototypes and in development over the last 50 years are now critically necessary.

In retrospect, the issues at stake were far too complex for a single act, tool, artwork, building, architect or movement to solve alone. It would be paradoxical if there could be a single transformative total-work. Instead, it is through the simultaneous collective performance of complementary strategies that the issue can be fully addressed.

Architecture has only partially answered the questions of the dead author. The role of the architect and work is to design space as a series of tools to actualize and support active public engagement and participation. There are two examples of this: first, to design more passive and flexible buildings that perform in such a manner; and second, to design spaces that inspire by example, illustrating the malleability of relations. The remaining question is to how to ‹make literate›, to motivate and to empower.

Olafur Eliasson's installations possess a revolutionary political tone that outlines a solution to the problem at hand. Rejecting art as a physical commodity, art resides in the experience and the perception of beauty induced by the physical and mental interaction between people and his work. Revealing the means by which the effects are produced (consequently purging the work of any remnant mystical element), the physical components of the constructions are only apparatus. Eliasson's work brings attention to the many beauties possible at the intersection of everyday objects and individual awareness. What distinguishes Eliasson's work is that his work is lo-fi, or «cool» media as Marshall McLuhan would put it. The work is open for interpretation and made to be distorted. The artist controls less and there is room for others to participate in shaping the experience. This kind of participation is unique because it occurs in a collective setting. Individuals can alter the environment but they may also experience the space as it is altered by others. Among many others, The Weather Project, installed at Tate Modern in 2003, could be construed as a social, environmental or ecological project. The sensual and interactive qualities of the work cumulatively operate to break down relationships between self, others and the environment. Visitors leave lightened of assumptions, prepared to construct their own insights. The theme is: people make the experience. This contingency is made apparent by the way Eliasson addresses his audience: Take Your Time (SFMoma), Your Engagement Sequence (New York), and Your Chance Encounter (Kanazawa). Eliasson works to arouse self-consciousness beyond the confines of the exhibition. In Your Engagement has Consequences, he writes: «Engagement has consequences and these entail a heightened feeling of

responsibility... if people are given tools and made to understand the importance of a fundamentally flexible space, we can create a more democratic way of orienting ourselves in our everyday lives. We could call our relationship with space one of co-production. When a woman walks down a street she co-produces the spatiality of the street and is simultaneously coproduced by it.» By breaking down our fixed relations with space and by offering environments that are without specific direction, reference or value, visitors realize their right to interact with and interpret the work as they perceive fit. The collective act of independent-thinking becomes a major contributor to the entire experience. Thus, a solution to empower the user is through relational environments: spaces that break down presumptions and liberate independent thought and action by revealing the relativity of perception.

A new sixties-like era has begun, but this time with a society made more conscious of its interconnectedness by great political, social and environmental upheavals. The conditions are right for work that relates to the networked space of our contemporary lives. We no longer live in a world of strict dichotomies but in one that is highly contingent. As Nicolas Bourriaud argues in Esthétique relationelle, creative work should reject over-deterministic subtexts and invest in ideas of engagement and open systems. The new form of agility is virtual: in atmospheres that cultivate independent intervention. Architecture, in its most valuable sense, resides neither in an object nor a tool, but in a highly contingent psychological space; reliant upon both its users and its counterparts to be an agent for the public voice. Only through combined means can the right environmental conditions be created to generate a healthy and active sociopolitical psyche. The contemporary task is to design these spaces of perception: in different ways but all the while conscious of the mutual aim to empower others.

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