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ABSTAINABILITY

Florian Idenburg



fig. a
On Friday, 11 March 2011 a Tsunami hits the Japan mainland due to the Tohoku earthquake – the most powerful known earthquake ever to have hit Japan. © AP

In a brief moment of anxiety, not uncommon in our current role of ‘Promising Architects’, a condition that allows for the quick recalibration of one’s own position before the ‘show is on’, I felt we should consider ‘broadening our appeal’. How can our firm, ‘SO – IL’, become more attractive to more clients now that we need to ‘capitalize on our potential’? I was thinking about our ‘marketability’, and impressed by the ease with which my peers incorporate Greenness into their practice. I pondered on how to develop an attitude towards this irrefutable big issue that calls to be addressed. Should the word ‘sustainability’ jump off our webpages? Should we get certificated by a brand that peddles stamps of approval? Should we become angry?

But then I mused on. We, as a profession and as a people, ostensibly need to develop our ability to sustain. But what exactly is it that we should sustain from? When the gods send their wrathful waters to our shores and their lightning bolts to our fields – when the day of reckoning is here – what is out there that is indispensable? Is it our highway network? The banking system? The oil industry – or wait, maybe the suburbs? It must be them... Why do we need to save this forlorn planet from the dunderheads that are destroying it? Can architecture really reverse our destiny? Should we engineer machines to protect us from the destructive mechanisms we have created? Can we really fast track modernity?

Suddenly I imagined a temporary flood-wall of hand filled sandbags carefully stacked by architectural volunteers in an undulating, parameter based pattern. A beautiful fluid array of sandbags – every bag slightly different from the other. Perhaps we could write a little script that laser cuts the bags. Now that would impress the rising currents.

...

I wrote the above harangue during the first week of March. The earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan shortly thereafter left me without words. After an endless replaying of the sublime imagery of the earth striking back, my mind was frozen. Is this what we are up against?

Ben Kinmont, an artist with whom we are working on a pavilion in the Netherlands, introduced us to a concept that he has been developing over a period of time. The Third Sculpture, as he describes it, is the idea that an artist, through the relentless pursuit of his/her work, ultimately leaves the art world. Not out of frustration, but because «if one takes one's work serious, one needs to identify the realm in which it can be pursued in the most fruitful manner.» Ben has identified a number of such people. Lygia Clark, the Brazilian relational artist, increasingly dealt with psychoanalysis in her work, to a point where she became a psychotherapist. Raaivo Puusemp's art dealt with politics. He ultimately became the mayor of a town.

What if we apply the same concept to the topic of sustainability within architecture? If one is serious about it, one should leave the profession. Abstain oneself from building altogether – and possibly even turn against it. Find ways to not build. Raise awareness in places where it matters. Use skills, brain, and computational power where they can have a measurable effect. Abstain from this oxymoron, green building. Architecture simply does not operate on a level in which it can make – or even trigger – the changes that are needed to sustain this planet.

For the humanitarians who want to stay, I offer one provocation, based on the belief that man can be inspired and shaped by the spaces he inhabits. We, as architects, are responsible for these spaces. I strongly believe this old aphorism will have a radical new clout in the near future. This is informed by the revolutionary progress made in the neurosciences. Our understanding of the workings and development of our brain has grown considerably in recent years. Soon we will be able to measure and chart precisely the way it responds to our sensorial environment. Needless to say, this thesis requires a more extensive exploration. For now I'd like to offer two preliminary leads: firstly, a recent study – sponsored by the insurance industry – shows that patients cure faster in a hospital

room overlooking a forest rather than towards a power plant. The environmental quality has a measurable effect on the dollar number of the hospital bill; secondly, negative environmental conditions through sensorial manipulation also provide measurable effects. Interrogation techniques used in recent wars prove and provide a slew of valuable data on this.

It is only a matter of time before more of these examples add up into a data set available to all. If we can develop tools based on this information, it can become useful for the conception of environments. Integrating these into our design software will help us getting insights in the sensorial performance of a design during the early stages of the process. We will be able to predict not only the cost, spatial efficiency, and energy consumption of a building, but also whether it will turn its users into healthy, happy beings or murderous psychopaths. Once we can provide «scientific» proof of the actual behavior of brain and body in our built environment; once designed space can have «a measurable effect» on the wellbeing of the inhabitants of this planet, there will be a real scope of work within our field, and a real responsibility for the architect. Until then, let's make buildings worth keeping and envision an architecture of, dare I say, delight.

A version of this Essay was published online as an op-ed for DOMUS in April 2011

Florian Idenburg, born 1975 is founding partner of «Solid Objectives – Idenburg Liu» (SO – IL), an conceptual architecture studio based in Brooklyn. He teaches design studios at Harvard and Columbia. Previously he held the «Brown-Forman Chair» in Urban Design at the University of Kentucky, and was Visiting Lecturer at Princeton University. Idenburg is the 2010 recipient of the «Charlotte Köhler Award» and holds a Master of Science in Architecture from Delft University of Technology.