Discussion: How Has Media Affected the Way We Produce Architecture?

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15. DISCUSSION
HOW HAS MEDIA AFFECTED THE WAY WE PRODUCE ARCHITECTURE?

Archdaily, Archinect, BLDGBlog, Bustler, Designboom...what is it doing to us?
I have been prompted by Marshall McLuhan’s ideas of information overload and its relationship to architecture. I see websites and blogs like Archdaily, Archinect, BLDGBlog, etc as our version of information overload. McLuhan suggest that when there is information overload we have to resort to pattern recognition. A pattern I believe rising in architecture is that there are three “camps” in architectural production.

These three categories include:

“Supermodernist”* = Tod Williams Billie Tsien / John Ronan / Vincent James / (Really any DM Firm), fig. 1
“Digital Based” = Shop Architects, Zaha Hadid, fig. 2
“LandForm Based” Weiss Manfredi, Bjarke Ingles Group, fig. 3

The “Supermodernist” runs prominent in the Midwest. They use phrases like essence, truth, material, and often expose the joints in their buildings to show how it is made. This can be traced back to Mies Van Der Rohe moving to Chicago and bringing his Bauhaus ideals to the Midwest.

“Digital Based” often uses parametric modeling to create forms previously unrealized. Slick renderings often accompany the projects. The projects are usually very processed based, resulting in an end product that looks like the process. Biophilia, and using patterns found in nature has become a new found source of inspiration for the driving forces behind the designs.

“LandForm Based” camp tries to blur the line between building and ground. Most often the argument is to give back green space to the overcrowded city. The architects try to sell the building as this: because the building is landscape, and it gives back landscape to the city, it HAS to be a good thing.

“When there is information overload we have to resort to pattern recognition.” - Marshall McLuhan

*A term coined by Michael Speaks
I looked at different models and concepts for formal, sociological, economic, and behavioral changes and how they are all integrating information and technology into them. Basically a rise in the role of information across the board. While there are downsides, some that we discussed (distraction, reliance on technology, a blurring of reality), there are obviously upsides as well, both for the design process, site research, and fabrication techniques. As we’re getting flooded with more information, we’re also getting much better at managing information. Look at BIM, where you’re not just drawing a line, it’s recognized as a wall, with a thickness, structure, etc.

I find myself in debate about the placement of Holl within the “Supermodernist” category, but I feel that debate could ensue about any architect’s placement into the three “camps.”

The discussion I recall having at the actual Datum meeting seemed to stem from an analysis on the relationship of the three camps to each other, and what, if any, significance these camps had in our current culture. This certainly raises the question of “who is king” and as such, which of these categories reigns supreme.

The relevance of popular culture or a zeitgeist (spirit of the age) plays no small part. Currently, parametric modeling has certain fad-like tendencies, and is, dare I say, “cool”. Parametrics are the popular thing to do. They are sleek and hip, they look badass, and in reality, they’re fast, quickly generated, and superficially successful where formalities can be ignored...seems a little harsh...sorry. This isn’t to say they do not present a level of value to the field of architecture. Now consider Supermodernism in reference to this digital sort of architecture. I personally find myself more in this category, but insecurities about the success or effectiveness of this kind of architecture cause me to have a certain paranoia in design.

I’m always looking over my shoulder, comparing my work to the desk across the way, and I get jealous over the interesting formwork the parametric guy is producing. I start to wonder how I can give my design a value in form that matches the parametric design without compromising the core values of the “Supermodernist” approach. This pushes the Supermodernist to innovate and evolve within itself.

Ultimately, the point I’m trying to make, is that the three camps push each other, and instead of jockeying for position as king they evolve individually to the ideal “camp”... whatever that might be.
“Supermodernist”, specifically speaking on Tod Williams Billie Tsien, has a timeless attribute that lends itself to be widely accepted by many. However, the interior finishes seem trendy and possibly outdated in the near future. For me personally, this architecture has the ability to clearly express the intended relationships between form and void (exterior and interior). It’s not to say these projects are overly simplistic, but more so that this clarity offers solutions to the dreaded pragmatic side of creating architecture while still maintaining the original intentions.

“Digital Based” architecture will forever change the face of architecture forever, but it will take a technical master(s) with refined spatial cognition to bring this technology forward in a positive light. I do have to mention my bias against using parametric modeling, as I feel it undermines the basic skills needed to operated as an architect. I do feel as though that “Digital Based” architecture will have its place and those pushing it forward will be greatly rewarded. However, as a designer who thinks differently and holds particular values, I do not find myself connected to “Digital Based” architecture.

For “LandForm Based” architecture, is it really doing what it originally intends? Is this evocative shape making with green roofs on top? As for the Seattle Olympic Sculpture Park, I find it to be building form with natural element aplique. These types of projects still create barriers between pathway, green open space and contained spaces. Rather, there needs be truth in what being done here, it’s not a landscape, nor does it really give back, it an architectural style that has yet to have a proper name or intentions.

As future designers and architects, I feel as though we need to break the animosity between architectural styles and support the pathways in which each individual discovers, learns and creates. (I myself have animosity against certain architects) This variance between designers creates a dialog in studio that’s greatly valuable in the learning process and ultimately would translate in the appreciation of a vast range of architecture.

An additional questions, What does it mean for a style to be king? Is it the amount of monetary funds thrown at a project and how many of these projects are built? Are we marginalizing the less popular, but still valuable architectural styles by doing this?

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I would have to somewhat agree with David. These three approaches to architecture need to be present in order to push each other. Architecture thrives on competition and the constant, “looking at the desk behind you.” It is an evolving, living entity. I do however (this is where I disagree with David) think that these camps are not moving toward one answer or method. Their purpose is circular. They exist to exist. Within this existence they morph and adapt to the changing age.

Reed said it best with his sentence, “This variance between designers creates a dialog in studio that’s greatly valuable in the learning process and ultimately would translate in the appreciation of a vast range of architecture.” I completely agree. Throughout my time at Iowa State I have constantly been comparing myself to others and always trying to be ‘the best.’ After this last semester though I realized how different my approach to architecture was from others. Because of this I have different priorities and thus have different outcomes. In a sense studio begins with a simple problem. Then as designers we assert our own goals onto that project. “I want this building to do this” “Well it has to have this.” “This part of the program is utterly flawed.” are some examples.

All of this boils down to the fact that each and everyone of us is unique and has our own goals within architecture. These camps that we are discussing are like political parties. You agree with the majority of one party, but still have problems with it. This is why architecture is fascinating. The outcome is unpredictable.

As far as the king comment. I hope that there will never be a single king, and that a projects status is not determined by its size or cost. Time, value, and impact should be the only variables in great architecture. How long is it going to last? What value to people get from it? and how has it impacted their lives in a way that nothing else can?

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