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San Francisco Federal Office Building, Morphosis/Smith Group

The Mayne Event – all things are possible

Noel Brady talks to Thom Mayne

Travelling to a suburban airport on the edge of a bustling metropolis with Thom and Blythe Mayne in a taxi through Dublin's busy streets was Chandleresque.

"Have we left the city already", Thom asks as we arrive onto the M1.
"No this is just an interlude", I respond.
He adds, "we must come back, visit for two days".
"Two weeks", adds Blythe.

On the previous evening Thom paid tribute to the American Nobel Laureate, author William Faulkner as an early influencer on his work. More Film Noir than high literature, (*Faulkner did co-script the screenplay for "The Big Sleep"*), Morphosis's work owes a lot to the play of interwoven storylines, all seeking singular resolution in the final denouement.

Collage

Asked why the work on the face of it seems to respond to the themes of "collage city", Rowe and Koetter, Thom responded; "Jeffrey Kipnis and I have been having this conversation for about 10 to 15 years where he connects the work to collage. Even though I studied under Rowe at Harvard, I refuse to accept it. The word was borrowed and was always misinterpreted. As I get older I become more aware of the diversity of my influences. My education and influences came from a variety of sources...Elwood, Ain, Ralph Knowles, the early use of computers and analysis through the work of Christopher Alexander and others. I am not clear now where the seam is between collage as a broader idea and these interrelated influences I've just described.... Most recently I've been influenced more by the things outside of architecture. There is a connective thread running through all of this, whereas collage seems like a more literal idea – I am now more interested in various organisational types and in their intrinsic capacity to make new material that has biological characteristics. I am moving away from architectural and literary references."

I asked Thom about the seismic shift that occurred in the seminal 6th street House project, which overlaid in a collage like fashion remnants of earlier work, which counteracted the postmodernist side bar that was the 2,4,6,8 house.

"That is interesting, the 2,4,6,8 was made in 3 hours. It is not typical of the way I usually work. I had just finished my work at Harvard where I had been working with Ungers and Rowe and had inundated myself with Rossi's work. This was my first post-Harvard project, what I consider now to be a fairly naïve piece of work – quite small and insignificant. Unbeknownst to me someone photographed it and it appeared in Domus. I feel somewhat burdened by the attention to that particular work."

Epiphany

"The 6th street house was an epiphany. I recognised at the time that something had taken place....that we had restructured an idea around the notion of the dialectic, between interior and exterior forces. The work also started moving away into very different ideas such as those seen in the Hippocampus Project, Copenhagen. Some of the ideas that were at play in the 6th street house were barely conscious. I was interested in entropy, in decay. We were using rust, materials and objects that became transported into the buildings. These works were parallel to Aalto – to his interstitial stuff. I was fascinated by the interstitial and with the idea of hybridisation that was coming out of Venturi's writing. The drawings themselves were of pieces of discarded technology. When the design was completed it became clear that we would not build it... It was a house for me and my family that had more value to me as a design exercise than as a place to live or a place to build. It remains unbuilt as designed. There are fragments of the original design that have been incorporated into the interior of the house".

Psychoanalysis

Comparing the 6th street to a sort of Rorschach test, with its use of sciagraphy, its layers of overlaid meaning (a sort of blot test), and in danger of stretching the point I asked Thom if it was a form of psychoanalysis.

"There was always a disconnection between the way in which the work was represented in drawings and the work itself. Because I was only building a small project every two years, the drawings became the work for awhile, and I recognised that these were a manifestation of my creative self. Maybe it was a sort-of self-analytic process... a filling in of the gaps between projects wherein I would work and re-work an idea through the materiality of the drawing.... At the time I would describe what I was doing in terms of 'constructing' drawings, I was aware that I was building what I was drawing and it led to a certain type of drawing, the use of the drawing to excavate."

Film Noir

Film Noir emerged as a response to tight budgets and a lack of studio lighting. This resulted in films of the 1930s and 1940s enveloped in chiaroscuro, the edge between dark and light before being swept away by Technicolor tm. In particular, Morphosis' recent work seems to be enveloped in this in-between world, neither object nor receiver.

"I am fascinated by shades of grey. I have no interest in Black and White. It

is clear to me now that the problem with the revolutionary stance was its overinvestment in the value of newness, in a fascination with the unique, which was part of the modern project. It is not appropriate today. We live in an evolutionary time, not a revolutionary one. If you look back at Venturi it is all about greys, about the areas in-between…and for the most part everything I have done has to do with exploring the middle ground, this place between things."

LA

I put it to Thom that, in terms of the pedagogy, the type of office, the idea of the collective, the information revolution in the 80s, the role of movies, it is a practice that could only exist there.

"LA is a base of operations. An enormous number of Los Angelenos of my age don't actually come from LA or even from California. I am a city boy from my roots and find that I spend more time in downtown Manhattan than in downtown LA these days. But that said, LA is a very vibrant environment and I happened to land there at a most interesting and open period. The affiliations of the LA schools have been amazing. Archigram had just left UCLA when I joined with several others to establish SciArc. A critical mass suddenly appeared with people like Coy Howard, Robert Mangurian, Craig Hodgetts, Eric Moss…. Frank (Gehry) actually arrived later. We were meeting all over town in juries, which functioned, as a kind of post doc program. The distances between the academy and the office were truncated – physically as well as practically because there was often a complete overlap between the players at each place. Allegiances developed between SciArc, Cooper Union and the AA – and much more recently with the Bartlett. The effect was to put LA on the map with New York as a significant architectural centre. To its credit the city lacks a single cultural authority, it lacks a traditional patronage and so it operates in a default mode where all things are possible."

Synapses

"What about cinematic story telling, particularly how the modern metropolis is reabsorbed into literature?" I asked, adding the idea that Morphosis buildings appear to be generated by multiple autonomous characters, all interwoven in a single play, a narrative of non-episodic processes.

Thom explained "the work can best be understood as a perception of sequences rather than through singular perspectives (as in photographs). When you visit the work you would recognise that I am interested in the sequential, in the very specific characteristics of buildings that have their own logic, that have their own objectives, which are more complex than iconic. I am taken with the idea that the building photograph should be as if taken behind glass, as in *The Passenger*, a film by Antonioni. The last scene, a tour de force, is one of the most powerful architectural events of cinematic history, where the action is taking place behind you. An understanding of architecture is totally dependant on those types of ideas, where architecture is a collection of visceral experiences which, even if not perceived one to one they reside in one's memory to form a complex additive process that allows one to fully comprehend a building."

I added, "the singular eye of the author which dominated the renaissance and even the modern appears to have been displaced in a series of split infinities, with no central architectural promenade."

"Somehow instinctively I never produced a perspective drawing, and as you say, it is now philosophically impossible to do so as there is no longer a singular centre. Any vision is equal to any other vision."

"Is this not a consequence of the drawings seeking autonomy over the work, being unable in real terms to represent the work?"

"This may be why I am always disappointed by the final manifestation of the work. Blythe thinks it has to do with my Calvinistic background, with a certain refusal to experience satisfaction in my own output. I can become quite depressed about the work when it's completed – this is something that surprises my family and friends who often wonder "how wonderful to have achieved this, why is he so gloomy?" The qualities, the desires and the potentialities are in the drawings or other unrealized pieces we produce…. In my head, and by
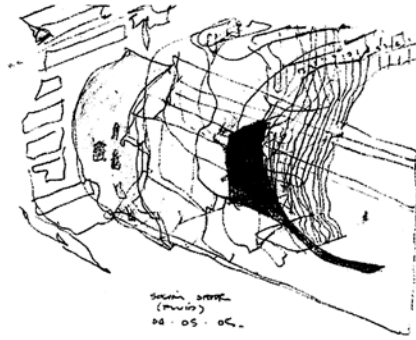
Sketch design for Cooper Union, New Academic Building, Thom Mayne, Morphosis

comparison to these, I am often overwhelmed with disappointment."

"Recently I saw a photograph that Lebbeus (Woods) took of his installation at the Cartier Foundation in Paris. It was shot using a stark chiaroscuro effect. I wrote to him explaining that he had finally found a way of building what he drew, and in some way by documenting the work the way he had it returned to its origins."

I asked Thom about the problems of using computers and the definitiveness of the mode of production where it is now possible to build virtually, and whether the depression comes early.

"The very last image I showed at the Dublin lecture was a fragment of a building. Frederic Migeryou, the curator at the Pompidou, saw it and said "Ah. You are doing 6th Street drawings again…you found a way of doing this on the computer." One operates under a certain set of constraints bound by methodology and by tools. The time (of drawing) is over now. Architecture operates now under a different set of modalities."

"You can produce a terribly complicated thing about which you know nothing. I'm of the tradition that you draw it, you understand it, it is completely internalised…the profession has a huge problem now. I can make a CAD/CAM model of 15 sections and look at them, young people do this but it is a mechanical operation. The power of the tools is challenging our role in process. There is a question as to who's actually in control. It is a lovely metaphor of where we are in life, a nice mirror of what is going on in the larger world today in terms of where the human character is in relation to machines and reality…."

Leaving the airport I was left thinking that what is behind us, in the mirror, is as important as what is in front. We had travelled secretly through the city absorbing its many pieces and influences, to be reconstructed at some future time.

Persistence

Perhaps the reason why students are very enamoured with the work of Morphosis is that it appears as the work of a perpetual student of architecture, exploring and developing a language that never quite fulfils its destiny, continuously re-tooling in order to adapt to changing circumstances, negotiating a place for action. Open ended, playful and a thing unto itself it seeks to loosen its grip with the earth below, floating for a time before fading away. Roll credits.
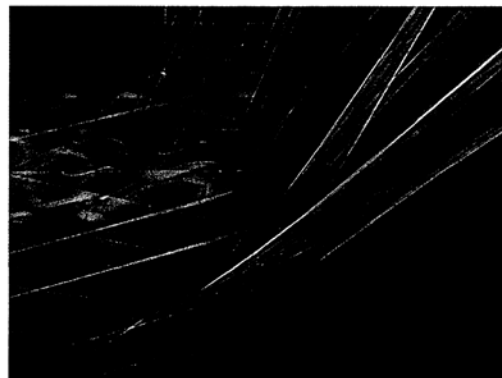
Computer analysis for Caltrans District 7 Headquarters, Morphosis