

## *shades of gray: a nascent manifesto*

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In his book, *Ideas that Shaped Buildings*, Fil Hern states that ‘architectural theory divorced from its historical background has no value.’ After a semester-long study examining architectural theories both past and present, it is evident that we as future architects must situate ourselves carefully, acknowledge the past while establishing our own future trajectory. Ages ago Vitruvius stated that a building should provide *commodity, firmness, and delight*. Most architects today still aim to satisfy these ancient ideals, though their processes and priorities are all unique.

The most challenging part of this pursuit is an architect’s ability to maintain balance: between form and function, the rational and irrational, syntax and semantics. In his *Logbook*, Renzo Piano states that, ‘the architect walks a knife-edge between art and science, between originality and memory, between the daring of modernity and the caution of tradition.’ We will always struggle to situate our projects in between these polemics. In his essay, entitled *Rem Koolhaas: Flagrant Manhattanism*, Damien states that ‘Manhattan gave Koolhaas his start and taught him to take up a vital dance between constraint and radical freedom.’ Another contemporary architect struggling to find balance in every project is Jean Nouvel. In *The Seductive Space of Jean Nouvel*, Grant illustrates how Nouvel balances modern technology and historical tradition in his Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. Finally, Yelena’s essay about Herzog & de Meuron references a quote by Rem Koolhaas where he proposes that ‘Herzog & de Meuron have been able to establish themselves at the Center of European and world architecture above all due to the fact that they are ‘in between’ - the north and the south, the new and the old, the unstable and the stable.’ A consciousness of balance, in both theory and practice, has been a key element for the successes of these contemporary architects, as well as architects of the past.

The use of metaphor is another paramount tool assisting in design which creates *commodity, firmness, and delight*. Many architects past and present have relied on this analogical, and somewhat irrational, tool to infuse their projects with meaning. Fil Hern states that Viollet-le-Duc’s ‘rational design method had ignored the matter of meaning in architecture.’ While le-Duc has historically influenced our rational process for design, many architects have looked elsewhere for inspiration regarding a building’s metaphysical or transcendent qualities. In order to produce meaningful architecture, we must balance rational and irrational elements of a project. I believe that this harmony is achieved when a project metaphor is created out of a synthesis of rational (programmatic/contextual) elements. Once a building’s functional needs have been analyzed and fully assessed, we can begin to determine a parallel - a metaphor - for the design. This metaphor helps to embody not only the innate functional/rational aspects of the building, but also helps to convey the allegorical/irrational character of the building. It is important to stress that the metaphor, in my opinion, should be a product of the rational synthesis and is therefore integral to the functional aspects of the building. If the metaphor is properly conceived based on the pragmatic synthesis of rational data, it can be relied upon to make material, structural, or phenomenological decisions which are not arbitrary, but rather rooted in rationale. Herzog & de Meuron admit that they follow the modern dictum ‘form follows function’ and this way of producing a metaphor ensures this connection between formal meaning and practical building function. In his Chapel of St. Ignatius for Seattle University, Steven Holl aligns his metaphor, seven bottles of light, with the seven programmatic functions of the building interior. I believe that the success of this particular project stems from Holl’s ability to develop a metaphor rooted in programmatic needs rather than arbitrary artforms.

Another challenge that we face as designers is creating meaningful space which addresses the spirit of our time. We are currently in the midst of a global paradigm and technology is dramatically altering the pace of our daily lives. Our present challenge is finding time for reflection rather than just reaction. In this way, tangible architecture can remedy our time spent in intangible/cyber space. I personally tend toward an aesthetic of clarity, regardless of context or metaphor, and feel that existential space should be more simplified and haptic than varied and dynamic. Unlike Holl's attitude toward phenomenology - shocking people into a state of consciousness - I believe that you can only access your innermost self when you are surrounded with clarity. This clarity does not necessarily imply an architecture of oversimplification but suggests that comprehensible spaces allow users to transcend without wrestling with navigation or functional concerns. In her essay on Tadao Ando, Pepsi states that 'Ando does not believe that architecture should speak too much.' His projects are often characterized by tranquility and transcendence, encouraging the user to explore the space and the depths of their consciousness. Ando states that, 'it is important that architecture should be a space where you feel spiritually empowered. To have particular 'styles' is somehow missing the point. There is universality to the human spirit that is constant, that should run through all that.' His impeccable use of concrete yields highly crafted spaces of purity for individual reflection. While Ando provides contemplative space *within* our contemporary chaos, Koolhaas and Nouvel provide alternative realities as forms of escape *from* the chaos. Koolhaas embraces technology but creates surreal 'synthetic realities of pleasure.' Damien attributes this to Koolhaas' infatuation of Coney Island as an escape from New York City. Similarly, Nouvel believes that architecture should 'cultivate fiction so as to approach reality better.' We, as architects, are always looking for a form language which appropriately addresses our contemporary society and either highlights reality or provides an escape from it.

Nearly every architectural design decision can be situated between two polemic opposites, forming a continuum. By acknowledging these continuums, it is possible to imagine that there are sliding scales between opposites, where you can adjust the potency of your message by adjusting the intensity of the medium with which you are communicating. For example, if you are (metaphorically) going from a place of 'chaos' to a place of 'calmness', the lighting, color, or construction detailing of the space would gradually move from intense and disordered to tranquil and straightforward. This subtle and graduated manipulation of materiality and intensity to support the intangible metaphor creates *values* within a project which enrich the user experience and communicate multiple levels of interpretable meaning. Jean Nouvel uses the idea of dematerialization as a conceptual continuum between solid and void in his 'Endless Tower' design, where object dissolves into the sky. Gradual manipulation along a continuum allows an observer to sense the progression from one thing to another and slowly digest the changing environment. In this way, phenomenology in design is patient and continuous rather than jarring and immediate.

The debate over structural and material honesty has been going on for centuries. In *The Outside is the Result of an Inside*, Thomas Schumacher says 'in much of the architecture of the modern movement, two important assumptions were tacitly made about the inside and the outside. One was that a building's social program ought to be read quite literally on the outside of the building, without the aid of inscription. The other assumption was that the interior spaces and volumes ought to be read as well.' In my opinion, the decision about whether to reveal the interior space or not and what materials you use and how, is all subject to the initial design metaphor and can change with every project. The articulation of structure and selection of material do not have to conform to pre-established rules and should be altered to fit the individual project program and metaphor. For example, if the building's metaphor is a tree because of programmatic concerns, then the tectonic structure of the space should support the metaphor. However, if the metaphor is about light, the physical building structure might be

secondary to illumination of suspended, transparent materials. That said, it is ideal if the structure and/or materials are actually innovated or pioneered to align with the project metaphor. A building whose metaphor is water and light might inspire the development of an 'aqueous' structure with light penetration. Rather than argue for honesty of materials, I think it is more important to support le-Duc's 'economy of means', or reductionist attitude, about structure and material as a way of encouraging sustainability and reducing wastefulness. This articulation of structure and material is the most tangible, communicative aspect of buildings. In the words of Herzog & de Meuron, 'materials suggest meaning.' Material selections and detail joinery form a 'language' which reveals a project's metaphor or message to its user. For example, steel bolts imply penetration while dovetailing implies grafting – they are distinctly different transitions which convey different messages within the haptic realm.

Finally, Ruskin believed that architecture had a civic responsibility to encourage moral improvement. Buildings have the opportunity to encourage public virtue as well as invite the city to constructively participate in its existence. Inviting the community to populate and enliven a building's environment is the ultimate gesture of faith and one that buildings can do with grace. By incorporating what Rem Koolhaas refers to as 'indeterminate space' or what Lebbeus Woods calls 'freespace,' we can encourage inhabitants of the city to animate flexible public space. The Pompidou Center in Paris is an example of a building which *shares* with the community, giving half of its site over to the public plaza for daily animation. In his essay *Diller + Scofidio + Renfro : Visuality*, Eric states that 'D+S+R's designs are based largely on the user and the audience and how they interact with the site.' He goes on to say that in many of their projects, 'the visitor is not considered a passive visitor, as perceived in typical architecture; they are considered an active visitor. Visitors enter the spaces looking, touching and experiencing the surrounding building, where they are empowered to modify and justify each space for themselves individually. This gives ownership of the building to its user.' Jean Nouvel's Lyon Opera House also empowers spectators to become part of the spectacle as the audience members' faces are illuminated during performances. Architecture has the potential to improve civic morale by involving the community in shaping and influencing flexible space. These democratic spaces become an extension of the city fabric, indicative of its many diverse users and genius loci.

Architectural theories will continue to morph and change over the years, constantly responding to paradigm shifts and technological innovations. However, some of the roots of our theory remain constant and stand the test of time, regardless of analog or digital implementation. If only accurate for a brief moment, it is essential for us all to situate ourselves among the contemporary masters of our lifetime so that we may know where we are headed, and most importantly, where we came from.