

The laziness of the shuffled façade

Rectangular right to reply

Dancing windows: the status quo

In the paper, *Dancing windows: the restless façade* (arq 10/3+4, pp. 191–200), Fiona McLachlan explores the current tendencies of contemporary architects to create ‘offbeat façades’.

The author refers to the classically ordered façade, the influence of interior layout and structure on external form, and the façade as skin, as a Venturi decorated shed, a finely crafted Jean Prouvé technical skin or a Mannerist approach, exemplified by Wiel Arets’ Utrecht University Library and a great deal of Herzog and de Meuron’s current output. There is also a commentary on Le Corbusier’s ‘free skin’, the façade free from the constraints of load-bearing necessity.

A selection of key twentieth-century buildings including Terragni’s Casa Del Fascio, Mackintosh’s Hill House and Coderch’s La Barceloneta help define the tendencies.

We all have our favourites, reflecting our educational background and exposure to different approaches. To the list, I would add Asplund’s Villa Snellman, Djursholm 1917–18 to blur the boundary between the Classical and Mannerist, and the wonderful court house extension in Göteborg 1934–37, to bolster the argument for intertwining the Rational and Mannerist, perhaps a little more subtle and less explicit than the façades of Casa del Fascio. Alejandro de la Sota’s Gobierno Civil de Tarragona 1956–63 would also be up there, its façades so fresh it could grace the pages of any journal today.

The author extends the discussion to a series of British Projects; Eric Parry’s Office building for Scottish Widows in Finsbury

Square 2002 and Reich and Hall’s Evolution House in Edinburgh 2003. It is here that the paper alludes to a problem that currently rages like wildfire across the city of London.

Parry’s building, from beautiful load-bearing Bowers Basebed Portland Stone, handsome and well crafted, admittedly draws inspiration from the Murcia town hall extension by Rafael Moneo 1998. Moneo’s masterful façade, fronting Plaza Cardinal Beluga, sets up a rhythm that avoids competition with the classical orders of its neighbours. It also acts as a kind of arcaded brise-soleil and balcony addressing the square. The reasons for all the moves made by Moneo in creating this influential building are self evident and make perfect sense in situ, however the situation in London is different.

The Scottish Widows project is better than most new office buildings in London. It is perhaps

surprising that this good architect was at ease designing a façade some consider too close to the precedent set by Moneo. Others would argue that Parry has successfully morphed this type of expression into architecture suitable for the Finsbury Square context and benign London climate.

At last count in London there were around a dozen projects that shuffle their stone or precast clad façades back and forward like the latest dance craze and just as many in ‘randomly’ configured glazed skins. It doesn’t matter whether the location is Paddington or Clerkenwell, Pentonville Road or Tower Bridge, it’s happening everywhere.

These are just the latest poor speculative buildings that like many others in the past will be knocked down or re-clad, quite simply because they lack any real substance in the first place.

Architects and developers cite all



Eric Parry Architects, Finsbury Square, London (2003): front façade



Reiach & Hall, Evolution House, Edinburgh

sorts of reasons for apparent irregularity, non-conformity and disorder as a new, creative and humane way to soften the blow of the homogeneous repetitive facade. In skilled hands this approach can yield extraordinary and subtle results; in London today the ubiquitous shuffled facade I guess is the work of lazy architects unwilling to reap the benefits of architecture considerate of context, history, structure, materiality and function.

The Planners in London appear to love this 'new humane' approach, just as they did the dreadful Post-Modern pastiches that sprung up in an identical fashion in the late '80s and early '90s.

I remember in the mid '90s seeing a reasonable Miesian building near Tower Bridge being stripped of its bronze anodised mullions and glass only to be wrapped in stick-on-brick and styrofoam mouldings. Overnight it became a mock Georgian mansion block. Now on Pentonville Road another not so good Miesian block is being morphed into funky shuffle-glazed student housing. How the inhabitants of Mies's Lakeshore Drive apartments ever survived without shuffled glazing I'll never know.

Caruso St John, in their King's Cross Central Office project from 2003, propose a carefully proportioned facade, regular in rhythm and fine in detail, mindful of Mies's control first displayed at his Promontory apartments from 1949, also layered with detail reminiscent of Sullivan's Wainwright Building, St Louis 1891 and Berlage's Holland House, London 1916. It is promising that not all of London has caught the Shuffle Bug.

As has been demonstrated in the past in London, Corbusian imagery in the wrong hands gave us clumsy, heavy-handed results that gave Modernism a bad name. The finely detailed and carefully proportioned Mies originals became bland boxes ripe for re-cladding before their use by date, and the shallow Po-Mo facades of the '80s and early '90s hardly even make it to the recycling bin.

And the 'restless facade'? In the wrong hands probably the longevity of last series winner of X Factor. And in gifted hands, one needs to look no further than Asplund and de la Sota.

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Heritage projects and community benefit in South Africa

The articles by Jennifer Beningfield and Alta Steenkamp in the same issue (*arq* 10/3+4, pp. 222-234 & 249-254) both spell out in great detail the formal and social dimensions of four recent memorial projects in South Africa, opening up for discussion many questions around the contribution and limits of architecture as political discourse. If we take the five works that are discussed between the two articles – Moerdijk's 1938 Voortrekker Monument, Noero Wolff's Red Location Museum, GAPP Architects' Maropeng Visitors' Centre, Rich Martins' Alexandra Interpretation Centre and the Living Landscape Project's Sophiatown tour – there is ample material for some telling comparisons.

The decision to publish both these articles has also added to their individual value. Both articles are carefully written, but pose slightly different arguments: Beningfield's trio of descriptions tries to move us from observing a building – the Maropeng Centre – that packages an evolutionary narrative, towards a tour of the former Sophiatown in which guides evoke the memory of a township that was demolished in an apartheid forced removal, via the middle ground of the Alexandra Centre that literally bridges between a museum and a community development project. She suggests that the less complete structures convey the more authentic experience because they require the agency of the visitor to imagine the meaning of the place. Steenkamp's piece, on the other

hand, uses a straightforward comparison of the strategies of the Voortrekker monument, built in the 1930s, and the recent Red Location Museum. The former she sees as didactic and monumental, and the latter as open to personal readings and (therefore) anti-monumental.

It would be interesting, however, given the relatively scarce coverage of South African works in the media, to extend the comparisons between all five works in order to be more openly critical. Is there such a difference between Moerdijk's closed structure, hung with didactic panels and the highly orchestrated narrative journey in the Maropeng Centre? Why is the acclaimed Red Location Museum's relation to its context so limited, when projects in Sophiatown and Alexandra are so effectively engaging with local spaces through interdisciplinary practices?

At the same time, these projects, although they respond to contexts that are very different, each deal with a function that is more or less the same – they create a museum-like space to commemorate a marginalised past. Is this done with sensitivity to the experience of visitors? What value does the building, as a frame, add to the series of encounters, including ones with other people that make up this experience?

In my own experience of the three larger buildings that the articles discuss, as well as of other celebrated post-apartheid projects including the Constitutional Court and Kliptown's Walter Sisulu Square, despite the quality of the building, the visitor is left with a sense of discontinuity from their



Rich Martins Associates, Alexander Interpretation Centre (Mandela's Yard), Alexandra, South Africa

immediate context. It could be argued that the scale and ostentation of many projects reflects the relative immaturity of the procurement process for public buildings in post-apartheid South Africa. There is clearly work to be done in spreading resources for heritage projects more evenly between sites as well as from the museum area proper to the context at large. In this respect, the decision by Cohen and Judin, who designed the small museum at Nelson Mandela's birthplace at Qunu, to spend some of the project budget to pipe water to the local village is exemplary.

The local acceptance of heritage projects is often motivated by material needs within poor communities. People are aware that tourism can lead to community benefit, and also appreciate the didactic value that heritage sites offer to their children. At the same time, such projects introduce new actors and economies into often fragile social situations, and without due care, they can open up fault lines between the project and its local site. Ironically, the use of architecture competitions, a strategy adopted by the Department of Public Works to assure the quality of heritage projects, can exacerbate such tensions. The expert juries and consultants serve to ensure that the projects meet the tastes of visitors, but bring little experience of the local context to their decision making.

All of this calls for a rigorous critical framework. Jennifer Beningfield's concluding remarks on seeing architecture as part of a *scape* is really useful in critically locating these projects within the many scapes – ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes – that Appadurai writes of in his description of global modernity. And she is equally correct asking how this all scales down to the landscape. In their built reality, it will be the experience of the public that come into contact with them that counts. In this respect, the crafting, materiality, scaling, and transparency of their spaces, in relation to the surrounding landscape, is their immediate significance.

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Critiquing prediction

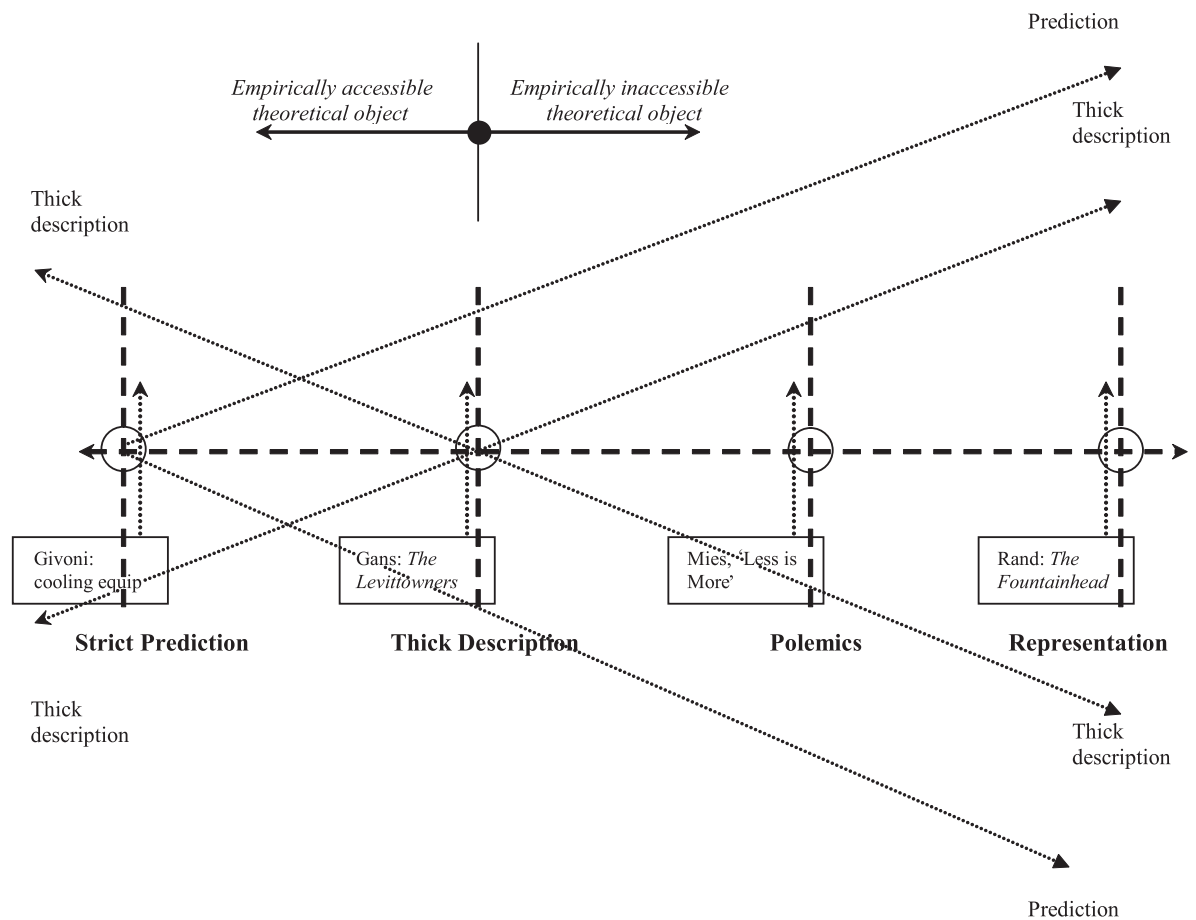
David Wang seeks to place all theories 'pertaining to architecture' ('an all-encompassing single spectrum of theory') within the rubric of 'predictability' (arq 10/3+4, pp. 263–273). It thus proposes to be a theory of theorising, or a meta-theory. The 'spectrum' is represented by a diagram consisting of a horizontal line with scientific methods on the left, conforming to 'strict prediction' according to 'experimental/quantitative' methods, and, on the right, 'fiction' (which is not 'fake'). In the middle the author locates ethnographic 'thick description', which marks the boundary between progressively more 'empirically accessible theoretical objects' to the left and progressively more 'empirically inaccessible theoretical objects' to the right. This boundary is also marked by – somewhat obscurely, or at least redundantly, to this reader – the intersection of a pair of symmetrically disposed diagonal lines apparently representing the progressively greater intensity of strict predictive value to the left, the progressively greater degree of thick description towards the middle and the comparative lack of intensity of both to the far right of the diagram. Most of the essay is devoted to tracking the shades of grey that proceed from left to right, from strict prediction to fiction, in the form of examples from analyses or accounts of architectural phenomena, from technical manuals to novels. It is so simple and straightforward, one wonders why it has never been tried before.

One possible reason this may never have previously seen the light of day is that it is unclear what it describes. At one point Wang speaks of 'aids to true interdisciplinary activity', but nowhere is this 'true interdisciplinary activity' described. In other words, the essay seems to arise from an impatience with a somewhat puzzling academic phenomenon, and it might possibly serve as a way of organising one's library. The leading concept – that of 'predictability' (and 'predictive coherence') – is nowhere developed ... prediction of what: good buildings, good analysis, 'true' interdisciplinary activity? Are the criteria of safety which arise from good fire codes (from the left of the diagram) to be related to the moral criteria (from the right of the diagram) according to this 'spectrum'? Is there any

responsibility on the part of those developing criteria of safety to look to the right of the diagram for moral guidance as to the limits of safety, or does each of these approaches pursue its own direction independently? Wang's arrangement seems to consign ethics to one end of his spectrum (and what is to be made of the claims on behalf of 'objectivity' in the scientific method as the most ethical?).

Is not the culture the author's 'spectrum'? Is there not here an effort to find the grounds of communication between architecture and the rest of culture? If so, practical knowledge is that in which 'interdisciplinary' prevails. Practical knowledge admits levels of involvement and understanding, whereas the 'inter' of 'interdisciplinary' is conventionally handled methodologically, according to the epistemology Wang seeks to place to the left of his spectrum. I know no better treatment of *theoria* in these terms than that of Hans-Georg Gadamer (*Truth and Method* and the three essays on 'practice' in *Reason in the Age of Science*), unmentioned in this essay. If the structure of culture is not what this project seeks to disclose (Wang wishes to leave room for the absence of 'truth'), is his 'spectrum' any improvement upon, say, the Dewey Decimal System (which Rem used to structure the ramps of the Seattle Library)? The project has the air of someone trying to resolve all difficulties by finding a neutral ecumenism in which all differences are simply aspects of doxa (opinion). Conflicts no longer matter, they are re-distributed along the author's horizontal axis.

The matter can appear so simple and straightforward because Wang adopts the position of neutral observer. His command of the mooted spectrum has been achieved dominantly through the secondary literature (particularly in the area of phenomenology, where one is subjected to all the usual clichés of misunderstanding), and the summaries are deeply superficial. I appreciate that this brief essay is no place to indulge an extensive analysis of Kant or Heidegger; but one would expect consideration of the relationship of epistemology to ontology. The age-old conflict between the sciences and the humanities (distorted in the social sciences by the active interest in deploying the quantitative methods of the physical sciences ever since the nineteenth century,



David Wang's diagram of the overall spectrum to prediction

as Dilthey observed) has been simply hung on a clothes-line to dry. I actually agree with many of the aperçus Wang offers along the way; but it is embarrassing to do so since the overall grasp of what is at issue is so profoundly naive, and all the details beg for clarification (e.g., what is the relation of 'empirical accessibility' to 'experience'?).

When the criteria for evaluation of scholarship for the HEFCE exercise were first being discussed, one of the options considered was quantity of citation by other scholars. It was immediately recognised that the surest path to success according to these criteria was to write an article which offended everyone, and thereby to attract the greatest number of citations. Wang's proposal is designed to offend no one; but, in excluding everyone from any import other than a location on the axial real-estate, we are left with the original problem of the relevance of 'research'. Correlatively, the relevance of architecture to the culture is obscured by assuming it is just another object of study rather than part of culture's claim upon all reflection.

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Buildings do not all have to be rectangular

It seems I should have made it clearer that my paper 'Why are most buildings rectangular?' (*arq* 10/2, pp. 119–130) was intended to help explain the propensity for the right-angle in architecture, not to promote it. I was trying to put myself and readers into the mind of my visiting Martian geometer. I probably should not have talked about sloping floors as 'pathological cases' and instead called them 'departures' from rectangularity (although they are unusual). Mark Burry (*arq* 10/3+4, pp. 182–184) detects a hint of a proselytising agenda even in my throwaway description of M. C. Escher's non-rectangular tessellations as 'irritating'. In fact my annoyance with Escher has more to do with his gnome-like figures and mechanical pen-work than with his geometrical creativity, which is indeed impressive. Burry says that mine is a 'shape grammarian's' take on the

issue. But the argument has nothing to do with shape grammars as such, which are tools for generating formal designs semi-automatically. The basis is rather in combinatorial geometry and the enumeration of the variety of arrangements that are possible on rectangular and non-rectangular grids. It was certainly not my intention that the paper be normative, and it was not titled 'Why most buildings should be rectangular'. Indeed I am presently working on a sequel paper on the merits (and disadvantages) of circular plans. (And *pace* Peter Blundell Jones I did not associate circularity exclusively with the primitive house, but illustrated examples of circular chapels and might have included a circular example among the theatres.)

The problem is that it is difficult to make purely geometrical arguments about built form, because this necessarily involves generalisation and abstraction, while as architects we want always to find value in the particular and unique. Blundell Jones (*arq* 10/3+4, pp. 181–182) is right to say that I would see his Alsatian village as confirmation of the general rectangularity or near-

rectangularity of building plans. But I can at the same time appreciate with him how the various minor departures from the right-angle can be the source of much interest and liveliness, in avoiding simple repetition and creating modest variations on formal themes. From a strictly geometrical point of view most rooms *do* approximate in plan to simple shapes such as rectangles or circles with all the anonymity and detachment from reality that that implies; meanwhile from an architectural standpoint real rooms of course have attributes and meanings of many other kinds. My general argument about flexibility of dimensioning in rectangular packings continues to apply I believe to packings of near-rectangles (although obviously some aspects of the subsidiary argument relating to rectangular components of construction would no longer apply). The two ways of looking at buildings are not mutually incompatible I would suggest. They just take different perspectives depending on the respective interests of the observers.

Blundell Jones says I dismissed rather summarily the psychological idea of 'body coordinates' as one possible reason for the prevalence of the rectangular in architecture. Actually I was positive, if questioning; and if I devoted little space it was because I thought that as an explanation it lacked scientific foundation. But Sonit Bafna has since told me that recent research in spatial cognition has indeed begun to identify just such a mental coordinate system and shown that our perception and memory of changes in direction as we move through buildings and cities are related to such a system of axes. Three references to this work are listed below. I continue to believe nevertheless that a psychological explanation along these lines is complementary to rather than exclusive of an explanation of the prevalence of rectangularity in terms of close packing.

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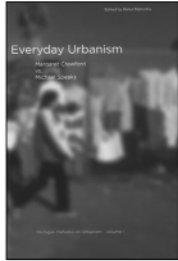
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Erratum

An error has been brought to the editors' attention in **arq** 10/2, for which we wish to apologise. In 'The Decorum of Doors and Windows, from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century' by Peter Kohane and Michael Hill references to Jacques François Blondel (J.-F. Blondel) in note number 23 and in the text above the quotation on page 151 should instead refer to François Blondel (F. Blondel). We regret any confusion this error may have caused.



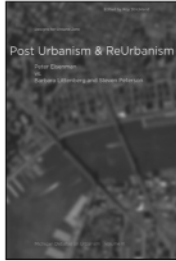
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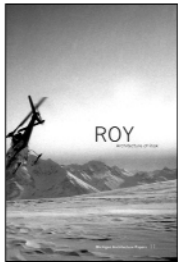
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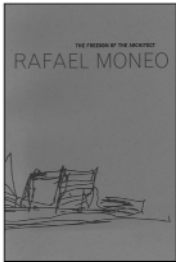
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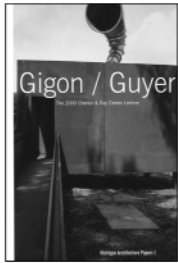


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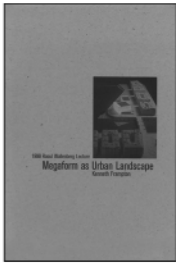
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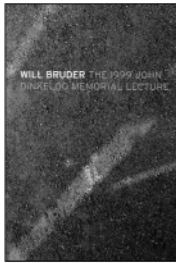
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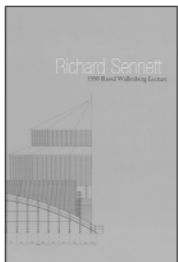


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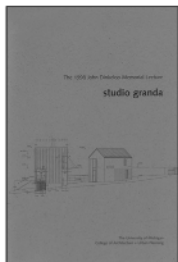


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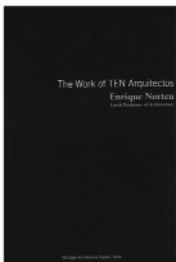
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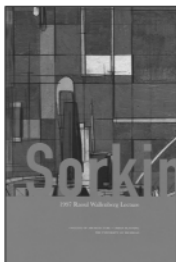
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