

# BEWARE, SHE'S HERE!

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ABSTRACT: Architecture has left the male paradigm behind and has become more sensual, more feminine. The language has changed.

The paradigm shift that brought us from the technological era into the digital has transformed people, architecture and cities. Image, software, and digital interaction are a constant in anything that seduces the contemporary individual. Most of all, it has to be *cool*. So architects need to understand, that either they become *cool*, and *design cool*, or they will perish. A new look is needed. Arup suggests that “Engineers are cool”, and maybe they are.

Digital Technology offers a new challenge. “It’s time to answer to that challenge” (Leach, 2002: 13) Have the courage to merge technology with the sensual vocabulary of the feminine, to imagine truly contemporary spaces. Both technology and sensuality create a new paradigm that we all should be aware of. Beware, she’s here!

## TEXT

Buildings no longer stand alone in city streets staring at each other, competing with other buildings for attention. Architecture now competes with fields like advertising, marketing, surveillance and the internet for the cultural representation of society. What once was a given, that anything built will be occupied, is more and more being proved an obsolete notion of our professional fields. Buildings compete with advertising, either surrendering, hiding behind huge billboards, or becoming a cultural reference and being recognized as an architecture object.

This means that architects no longer compete only with each other, but increasingly with the fields of design and marketing. This competition is not direct, I do not mean that designers do the architects work, but advertisement is gaining importance in the city, while architecture loses it.

## REALITY CHECK

Change is a constant in our fields, though many ignore this fact. While old paradigms are replaced by new ones, architects and engineers seem preoccupied with doing what they have always done, the same way they know how to do it. Since the end of Modernism architecture has been shadowed by the definition of Post-Modernism where little evolution can be noticed. Few things have changed in the last 80 years. Sure there are new materials, new technologies, new things to put inside the buildings and outside them, but the actual buildings have barely changed.

Most architects still design with lines that are to be printed. Three dimension representations are used by many only as a marketing tool. The methodologies have yet to change, but outside, things are changing. The market doesn't wait, and architects engineers are behind.

For many centuries architects and engineers have spoken the same language. Space and structure were written in a male reference language. All references to the beautiful were related to symmetry and balance, "male anthropomorphism, has underlined the system of architecture ever since Vitruvius, read and rewritten in the Renaissance and through the Modern Movement." (Agrest, 1996:542).

The Vitruvian concepts of Beauty, Stability and Functionality have been transformed, and at the same time the male's reference in structure and form. For Neil Leach the "aestetization of the world is complete" (Leach, ), this results in new patterns of expression. The rigid and perfect forms of Euclidian geometry were substituted with more sensual and provocative forms. The women's' body is now the pattern for advertising and design, making sinuous curves a new base for design. These lines influence us all, and it seems we now expect sensual lines from all objects and spaces.

After centuries of being rejected by architecture, the woman has now a place inside it. The architect is a transsexual being. Filarete wrote "Since no one can conceive himself without a woman, by another simile, the building cannot be conceived by one man alone.(...)he who wishes to build needs an architect. (...) When the architect has given birth he becomes the mother of the building." (cited by Agrest, 1996: 547). Architecture is becoming feminine, it's now sensual. Architecture is now "female".

Advertisement proves this. Women's bodies are used to sell any kind of products, from cars to alcoholic drinks. The art of seduction has replaced the rigor of proportion. As cities become full of women's images that explore their sensuality with commercial interests, beauty has given place to seduction. Finally architecture is losing the references to geometric concepts like the cube and sphere and replacing them with sensual forms possible by the domination of computer geometry. Image has become a language in its own right and advertising and architecture explore this new language.

Architecture has left the male paradigm behind and has become more sensual, more feminine. The language has changed. Still, few are the ones that try to *speak* it, even fewer the ones that know how to *speak* it. This is the language of seduction, one that explores new visions and new aesthetics. The one used to communicate in an aestheticized world. The industrial society gave way to the society of information. As a result new ideas emerge, making way to new methods of working and of expressing, creating new spaces that embrace the way this new society uses space. As a result of all the information mechanisms explored around the city, our perspectives are altered in ways that suggest new ideas of architecture.

Great exercises in architecture redefine urban space and reset our images of certain cities, increasing their value and directing attention to the place where they are placed. This happened with the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the Petrona Towers, Casa da Música, among others. The interaction these buildings explore with the citizen give way to new aesthetics conditions, already explored by advertising. Society has never stopped changing. How then could it be that architecture has not evolved much for 80 years? If architecture reflects the knowledge of the time, few are the architects that reflect with thoroughness the society of information.

For many generations, architects that dared to experiment were considered decadent. Hedonism acts in the architecture universe were suspicious and commonly rejected as reactionary interventions (Nesbitt, 1996: 532). The idea that architecture can exist without functional or moral justification condemned some architects to the “exile”.

These architects were first exposed during the 1988 MoMA exhibition on Deconstruction Architecture. Though many were in the vanguard of design, few actually had work. For many years they were exiled to magazine pages, presenting projects that would not be built. Though most of these projects did not materialize, their view of society was accurate, and their perspective of architecture was thorough with what they saw. Meanwhile the main perspective on architecture began to degrade. In those pages, the exiled architects communicated their views, it became a *piece of resistance*. Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelblau and Bernard Tschumi would gain respect and influence other architects and reshape cities.

They reclaimed the definition of the architect as the Master of the Building. They brought back the art expected in architecture. This new way of designing and building, above all, of thinking architecture, is more and more common practice and is more in tune with contemporary society.

While many architects seem to be in the avant-gard, it seems all of them have one thing in common. The engineering team. The international engineer team ARUP follows these architects reshaping the engineers contact with architects and artists. From Herzog to Zaha Hadid, from

Siza Vieira to Daniel Libeskind, from architects to artists such as Anish Kapoor, ARUP has been engaged in braking reality's boundaries.

## BACK TO UTOPIA

Architecture, as any other design product is becoming more erotic. One constant feature in the society of information is the pursuit for pleasure. Either drinking wine, driving a car, or watching TV, we all spend most of the time pursuing pleasure. And we get it, use it, and continue to look for more. Reality is not enough.

Car manufactures, for example, have always shown amazing prototypes at car shows. Our cars have now more erotic looks. They have lost the geometrical rigidity once so traditional in them. Dishes, Coffee machines, shoes, they all seem to have been rethought and have now a new image.

Since the Utopian explorations of the Modern Movement we've been stuck with reality. The immersion in a society of the spectacle see's that all our attentions are centered in the spectacular possibilities of life. In our society of information it is illusion that pushes us, for it "illusion is only real, truth is profane" (Debord, 1984: 1). The pursuit of pleasure is our main goal. Everything is sold with mechanisms that elude you to expect pleasure from its consumption. Drinks, cars, vacations, they all hide behind illusion.

Architecture has stepped into this paradigm, where all things are expected to pleasure the user. Buildings too have begun to explore this game playing the seducer to an audience that expect to be seduced. As there "is rarely pleasure without seduction, or seduction without illusion"(Tschumi, 1996: 537), it is the latter that now is the rule. So we have gone back to utopia, but a different utopia it is. Buildings, just like the car prototypes, reshape our expectancy from architecture. They make us dream of new spaces.

It is only obvious that if the conception of space changed in the Renaissance with the invention of the perspective, that our notion of space was transformed with the discovery that the world was round. The same should be true that with the availability of new tools of design such as software, that the same conception should again change, and with the extension of the social world beyond the TV screen our notion of space will once again be altered. This change is already visible in many architects, in many cities. But not all architects and engineers can say that they have evolved with the introduction of technology into their workplace.

More and more it becomes clear that those professionals that will not evolve, will lose business. And those that have stagnated since the introduction of the computer will have difficulty competing with those that have embraced technology. For long we have focused in the material world, limiting our conceptions within our spectrum of possibilities. This spectrum is now

broader, “it’s time to expand this vision and renegotiate the territory of the architect” (Leach, 2002: 13).

The graphical language is entering all aspects of human expression. Architecture too becomes a dialect in this global language in an aestheticized world. It has become as much pictorial as it is geometrical. It is designed to shelter as much it is designed to delight the spectator. Buildings that do not speak this global language are condemned to become blank billboards where advertisement that “speaks the language” can be shown.

If “architects have become increasingly obsessed with images and image making, to the detriment of their discipline. The sensory stimulation induced by these images may have a narcotic effect that diminishes social and political awareness, leaving architects cosseted tithing their aesthetic cocoons, remote from the actual concerns of everyday life.” (Leach, 1999b: viii) They may just as well have missed the paradigm shift. Some architects are designing for a public that is not interested in what they build. It has become irrelevant; it’s natural that it will be consumed by advertising.

#### BACK FROM UTOPIA

I believe that the “aestheticization of the world is complete” (Leach, 1999b:6), so architects need to reclaim their purpose of designing space for the people. If “whoever is under-exposed to the media is dissocialized or virtually asocial” (Baudrillard, 1994: 86) which can result in the development of ordinary architecture. On the other hand cultural relevant buildings as marketing tools can be found in t-shirts, magnets and post-cards. Anyone that goes to Paris comes back with a t-shirt with the Eiffel Tower.

No other city uses architecture as advertising as does Dubai. In 20 years they turned desert into an architectural theme park. A city that aims at being heaven on earth, where what may seem as mere mirage is actually an architectural experience. Just as Las Vegas found in the desert a *far away land*, where fantasies come true, and seduces you into never leaving, remembering that “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas”. Disney appeals to the masses with the same ambition, building its *Never Never Land* inside the city, creating an accessible place “Where dreams come true”. Dubai *Festival City* is now the theme park for business men, *where deals come true*. Just as Las Vegas is always transforming itself, and as Disney every year has new attractions, Dubai builds new spaces that bridge between physical and digital space.

These buildings have all the characteristics you find in good advertising. The concept I will call *Sexy and Ironic* (S&I) architecture is a kind of welcomed exotic graffiti in cities. An answer back to the one sided advertisement communication. It’s a form of expression that brings architecture to the city as art, not as billboard support. *Sexy* shaped, *Ironic* message, *Dramatic* expression, *Abstract* meaning, *Exotic* provocation, results frequently in an architecture that is in it-

self an expression of the global culture branding. Advertising to the world, in the form of architecture, “Forget TV, architecture is back!”. Instead of advertising cities and countries on CNN, why not design a building that will be in all magazines everywhere?

Buildings like “Guggenheim Bilbao and the Petrona Towers in Kuala Lumpur have established the principle that the construction of a significant building can imprint the city in the mental map of the world” (Leach, 1999a: 50), something I’m sure advertising cannot. Architects have begun to change their methods in order to apply “new architecture parameters able of dealing with the complexity of redesigning the city from an object” (Saggio, 2005: 232).

The last 15 years a new kind of architecture has been emerging. This approach to architecture seems to be immune to advertising, as it is in itself a form of advertising, advertisement of architecture. These buildings don’t advertise summer beverages, tobacco brands or fast food chains. It’s an advertising of itself, architecture as an ad for architecture and for the city. It uses advertisement strategies. *Add for architecture’s Sake* is explored in a way that gives architecture back to the people.

The paradigm shift that brought us from the technological era into the digital has transformed people, architecture and cities. Image, software, and digital interaction are a constant in anything that seduces the contemporary individual. Most of all, it has to be *cool*. So architects need to understand, that either they become *cool*, and *design cool* stuff, or they will perish. A new look is needed.

There’s a post-modern version of individual (that comes close to the cyborg), a post-modern version of communication and interaction. A post-modern way of living and working. These activities need a post-modern version of architecture. Do architects and urban planners think that people that wear Nike shoes, ripped jeans, walk with iPods and talk on iPhones want to live in the same kind of boxes that have been built for the last 90 years? It’s about time we start exploring design as designers do.

Since reinforced concrete was invented, structure that used to be in the walls was concealed in walls. The volume reduced and space seemed to free itself. Windows grew with no limit and light invaded spaces. But with new geometrical solutions vertical pillars are no longer an option. Structure needs to follow the sensual forms of architecture. Structure is returning to exterior walls where it can become itself *the form*, and where the outside layers become the skin creating the volume. Form and structure are again connected and for this new forms of construction are needed.

As our relation with space changes a new relation between engineers and architects is required. In a Digital Age, lines on paper will be traded with bites on screen. Architects and engineers will need to communicate in a new language, the language of three dimensional digital space.

Computers allow control of free flowing curves as easily as we controlled the straight line with our pens. It makes sense, you change tool, and it changes the result. Using the mouse results in new architecture, although most architects are still using computers as technological evolved pens.

The available technology allows us to build almost anything. CAD/CAM machines substitute the paper based construction, making complex custom design as easy as standardization and repetition. Customization becomes the new reference for the information society. This is already true in the car business, where in several models you can almost design your own car, personalizing many aspects of the car so that you end up with your own image. One that makes you look cool.

If we look at current developing cities, such as Dubai, it doesn't take long to realize that reference buildings are designed by the same architects as reference buildings in Europe or Asia. You have OMA, Hadid, Un Studio and many others that have for long embraced technology. Not only embraced, but above all, they have become the propulsion engine for the evolution of architecture. These architects redefine the profession, influencing young architects and teasing construction related companies to evolve to make their "dream designs" become reality.

What is curious about many of these reference projects is that they have as consultant the same engineering company. ARUP signs most of the engineering projects. It is also present in many impressive large scale works of art. Arup seems to be the consultant reference in the world, changing the way engineers are viewed. Arup suggests that "Engineers are cool", and maybe they are.

Digital Technology offers a new challenge. "It's time to answer to that challenge" (Leach, 2002: 13) Have the courage to merge technology with the sensual vocabulary of the feminine, to imagine truly contemporary spaces. Both technology and sensuality create a new paradigm that we all should be aware of. Beware, she's here!

Notes:

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