

# Architecture from the (hyper) real world

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Anna Klingmann

## ARCHITECTURE FROM THE (HYPER) REAL WORLD

This article examines current trends in architecture as a product of three complex interrelations: the increasing dimension of *interiority* effected to a large extent by a globalizing economy, the social aspect of *(in)difference* inaugurated by a gradual blending of formerly pluralistic identities, and lastly the implications of mediated *affects*.

### Socio-Economic Scenario: A Brief History of Styles

Architecture, as a medium of lending form to speculative projects of venture capital has always been a volatile commodity at the whim of economic forces. As a contingent result of economic currents, stylistic shifts in architecture are market driven. Just as Modernism was a style driven by a fordist economy stressing production, Postmodernism is the stylistic effect of the socio-economic climate of consumerism.<sup>1</sup>

Early on in the 20th century all modernist improvements were aimed at achieving efficient work and living conditions in order to effect higher levels of productivity.<sup>2</sup> As production oriented companies in the second half of the century were increasingly unable to support their dominance over other economic sectors in the world, production gradually transferred into developing countries. The endresult is a service economy driven more by consumption than production. The implications of this new economic conjuncture led financial investors and governments alike to be more concerned about marketing. As the economy shifted from production to consumption, the economic expectations that were placed on architecture changed with it. The emphasis on architecture as a means to increase production efficiency declined, and more and more pressure was placed on architecture to perform as a marketable commodity. To maximize production meant to optimize efficiency in buildings (fordism), but in order to maximize consumption, entrepreneurs had to maximize aesthetic appeal.<sup>3</sup>

Architecture, as a highly profitable commodity thus played a keyrole in the market of a corporate building industry, catering to the diverse needs of a pluralist consumer society. This need for market diversity manifested a variety of historicist styles in architecture, collectively known as Postmodernism. Although Postmodernism has to some extent, saturated the pluralist market of the late capitalist society, it could only offer singular instances of fixed identities, each confined to certain limited historicist parameters. Identity conceived as this form of sharing the past became to be a losing proposition.<sup>4</sup> Postmodernism gradually fell short of meeting the demands of a late capitalist economy, marked by the rapid transition from transnational competition to an aggregate of globalizing monopolies. Hence current marketing strategies increasingly stress the coexistence of diverse identities in respect to their collated cohesion as “Generic-identity”.

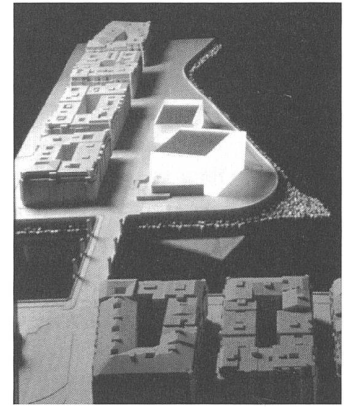
As a necessary consequence the marketability of architecture has shifted from external aesthetic appeal, propagating the incoherence of plural identities, to a product, that chooses to ignore notions of identity altogether with a new emphasis on *operativity*. Having exhausted the diversified market of externalized pastiche, consumerism has become largely *interiorized*. The economic marketing of Generic-identity, contingent on emergent absence of identity on one hand and prescribed degrees of redundancy on the other, gives rise to a new style in architecture that may best be circumscribed by the term “Genericism“. Genericism increasingly disregards the notion of a pluralistic identity marked by difference, empathizing instead with a new *cohesion* of identities, effected to a large extent by the merging monopolies of a globalizing market. By avoiding the commitment to any formal notions of particularity – thus resisting the temptation of new architectural ideals or iconographies –, Genericism accedes Generic-identity in its compliance to blankness. The result is a highly profitable product, that in its formlessness assimilates the rapid shifts of a global economy.

## New Culture Devolution or in Search of the Generic

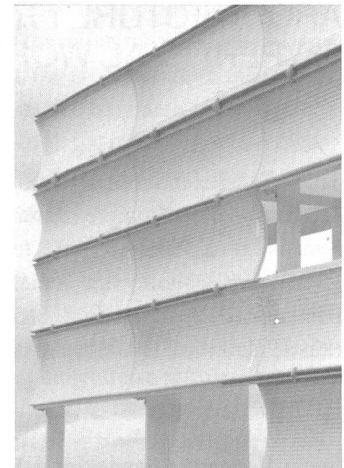
Old politics of nationhood on their steady decline have been increasingly augmented by new economics of identity.

As human emotions, concerns and sensations become increasingly mediated, the individual experiences a process of 'emptying', a cleansing of identities, summative in a categorical state of (in)difference. This state of (in)-difference where no(thing) matters, or conversely where every(thing) matters exactly the same can be observed in numerous contemporary cultural phenomena: channel flipping is one of the pertinent examples pointing to this surrender of subjecthood. Rather than identifying with one particular program selection for any extended length of time, (which would reaffirm a sense of the subject), the point is to loose ones subjectivity in the multipliteous compound of synthetic identities. As the post-modern psyche is now at home, ceaselessly channel flipping on the identity net, the marketing of identities has become a bit like television, where perhaps the only essential moment is determined by the cut, the switch from one identity to another. "This attitude of mesmerized indifference not only expresses a certain kind of fatigue with the contemporary politics of difference (social, sexual, ethnic), but rather intimates a more fundamental fatigue: a strange drive to indistinction, a paradoxical desire to be desireless, to be done with it all, a call of regression beyond the infantile to the inorganic."<sup>5</sup> "What emerges as a certain elated ecstasy in the imagined breakdown of the image-screen and/or symbolic order on one hand; simultaneously also produces feelings of horror at this fantasmatic event and a despair about it."<sup>6</sup> This schizophrenic condition, already anticipated by Postmodernism in its excessive use of language, provokes a compensatory investment in the *image and the instant*.

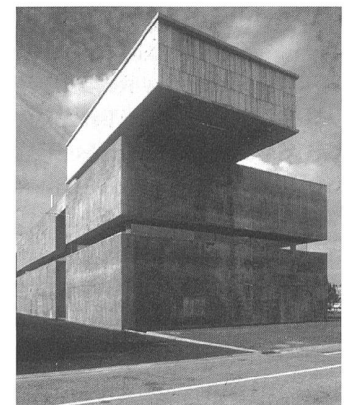
Spatially this phenomenon of collective (in)difference manifests a strange desire to inhabit a place of *total affect and to be drained of affect altogether*.<sup>7</sup> The space of a rave party facilitates precisely this condition. Compared to the social setting of a conventional party, where one desires the interaction with the perceived other, one attends a 'rave' for one reason only: to loose oneself. The sheer number of participants (sometimes thousands) makes it impossible to single out individuals for more than just a few seconds. As a consequence the other as an externalized means of reference ceases to exist. A single strobelight does no longer serve to highlight difference = interest, but instead produces a cohesive space marked by the perceived infinity of continuous body movements. As such the 'rave' constitutes a space, marked by the totality of its mesmerizing external affects and the resultant state of non-affect (indifference) of its participants. The trajectory of the Generic lies within the collective loss of identity, pointing to the dormant potential of a "Generic-identity", yet undefined. Callois, in his book "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" argues that in this drive



1 Rafael Moneo, Kursaal for San Sebastian, Spain



2 Rafael Moneo, Kursaal for San Sebastian, Spain, Fassade detail



3 Maximiliano Fuksas, Maison d'Art, Bordeaux, France



4 Maximiliano Fuksas, Maison d'Art, Bordeaux, France, Fassade detail

to indistinction, the notion of subjecthood has been entirely relinquished: “To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them.”<sup>8</sup> A new space marked by coherence emerges from this collective abdication of subjective differences: accelerating the collapse of outlived identities, Generic-identity simultaneously compounds a new “unknown” form of identity. Generic-identity does not resist identification per se, but (re)introduces identities in their fleeting temporality, simultaneously defined by continuity and intervals. In this way identities are reproduced by modes of acceleration to effect a monolithic instantaneity. While Foster entertains the notion, that we may have reached the point of nihilism, hence equating Generic-identity with *non-identity*, I would argue that the Generic may point to a new form of “intensive coherence”, as formerly defined by Jeffrey Kipnis.<sup>9</sup> Koolhaas acclaims the convergence of identities in his provocative essay “The Generic City” as a “global liberation movement”. Devoid of fixed identity, the argument goes, the urban fabric turns into a largely internalized experience, solely defined by its own redundancy, hence pointing to the conjecture of operativity as the only point of reference. He reasons further, that the identity of a city severely limits its potential for expansion; thus conversely commends the lack of urban identity in its latent potential of increased flexibility. While this “absence of identity” intrigues a very seductive polemic, it remains questionable whether the resultant excess of mobility will not very soon inform another form of paralysis – perhaps even enter into a mode of ultimate stasis and stagnation. Koolhaas ends his essay with the cutting remark: “Relief ... its over. That’s the story of the city. The city is no longer. We can leave the theater now.” In this way Koolhaas emphatically drives the Generic into a space of absolute nihilism. One is left with Foster’s question “if this point of nihilism indicates the epitome of absolute impoverishment, where power can no longer penetrate, or a place from which power emanates in a new form ... a refusal to power or its reinvention?”<sup>10</sup>

### Two Types of (Non)Critical Practices in Search of the Generic: The Myth of (Un)Contaminated Purity

In their detachment from the pluralistic assumptions of Postmodernism, two major categories of architectural practice emerge in search of the “Generic”. While the garden variety of New Minimalism<sup>11</sup> approximates the concept of the “Generic” with a nostalgic aesthetic of primordial form, Infrastructuralism accepts the growing economic entrenchment of architecture as infrastructure as its most generic condition.

### New Minimalism:

New Minimalism in its aspiration of non-referential objecthood, places great emphasis on effecting simplicity, striving to condense programmatic disparities in one singular volume. The inscription of architectural program into one prismatic volume rejects the commitment to a particular form. Rafael Moneo talks about the “mute condition” (referring to Tafuri’s statement, that architectural elements speak for themselves) of the primary forms. Yet it is precisely within this mute condition, that New Minimalists find the most generic aspect of architecture.

### Infrastructuralism:

Peter Eisenman recently stated<sup>12</sup>, that capital no longer sees architecture as anything other than the functional accommodation of its infrastructure. Infrastructuralism readily assimilates Eisenman’s critique as its manifesto: Infrastructure, as virtually formless, is perceived as architecture in its “purest”, hence most generic state. Similarly, infrastructural strategies in architecture are focused on the implementation of programmatic efficiency, yielding to what one might call ‘operational’ rather than “formal” effects. Indifferent to notions of form, this kind of architecture strives for invisibility, assuming a temporal identity only through the momentary maximization of its event-structure.<sup>13</sup> The way a building operates is captured as the most generic moment in architecture. This generic *modus operandi* as implemented in infrastructure-architecture enables architecture to persist detached from the specifics of *loci*. As architecture has thus been stripped of all symbolic and formal signification, performance has become its paradigmatic criterium.

### Six Points on Generic Architecture

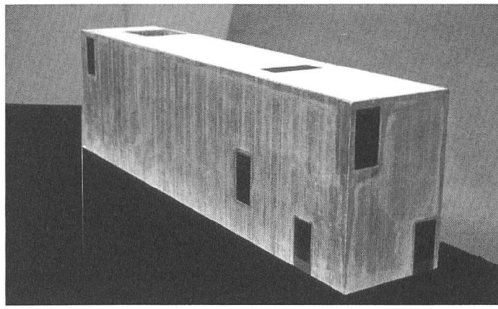
Real: Reductivism & Mimesis

*Generic architecture propagates a quest for the real.*

Rather than questioning cultural discrepancies in fragmentary techniques of collage, Generic architecture simply accepts these disparities in their enigmatic existence. Not for or against, not this, not the other, nor in-between but simply there.

Leaving derridian and deleuzian discourses “confidently” behind, New Minimalism announces the revival of objecthood. Reductivism in this regard not only serves as means to drain architecture of its former significations, but also to guard against the increasingly uncontrollable affects of the real. New Minimalism is not intent on revealing the real, but rather on suppressing it for as long as possible. In its reiteration of pure form and relentless insistence on materiality, New Minimalism perpetuates an architecture in denial.

Infrastructuralism has emerged as an intensified compressor of the real. By overexposing forces, that have long been recognized as beyond the control of the



5 Herzog & deMeuron, Kunstkiste, Bonn, Germany

architectural discipline, Infrastructuralism is intent on establishing a new set of parameters. By shifting the focus of architecture from the static implications of form, to the variables of ephemeral event-structures, Infrastructuralism identifies with an invisible real. The traumatic shock of a real beyond command is ironically re-enacted in reiteration. By mimicking the very forces that shape the real, Infrastructuralism actually screens the real. This screening of course points to the real nonetheless. Infrastructuralism in this way strives to direct the forces of the real to some degree, but more often simply imitates these forces in a miniature type scenario.

#### Interior(ity): Intensive & Extensive

*Notions of external identity have been supplanted by internal operativity.*

New Minimalism limits the dimension of interior(ity) to an actual exclusion of the *exterior*. In this dialectical connotation of interiorization as intensified privatization, New Minimalism propagates an *intensive interiority*. Detached from context and site alike, projects of New Minimalism claim self-sufficiency. This indifference to context is directly contingent on the efficient operations of its internalized reality. Programmatically entirely introverted, the architectural setting is tailored to the performative needs of the individual. By inverting a formerly exteriorized public identity (as in Postmodernism) into a largely interiorized private affair, the architectural object is no longer identifiable, hence as a result becomes generic.

Infrastructuralism originates an *extensive interiority*, which in its continuous expansion collapses the public (exterior) and the private (interior) into a heterogeneous continuum. Based *a priori* on the performative, Infrastructuralism just like infrastructure is by necessity generic. Devoid of established identity, Infrastructuralism always renegotiates public and private territory in its pronounced articulation of ephemeral event structures. Curiously enough, despite its extensive emphasis on performance or rather because of it, Infrastructura-

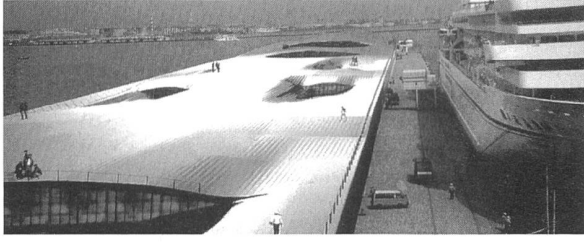
lism operates within the dimension of interiority. Infrastructure is not something to be mused at from without, it can only be experienced from *within*. The prefix “infra” is not only suggestive of something that lies *below* – awaiting completeness by the superimposition of something else (program); it also suggests that something is happening *within* (event).

#### Surface: Opacity & Transparency

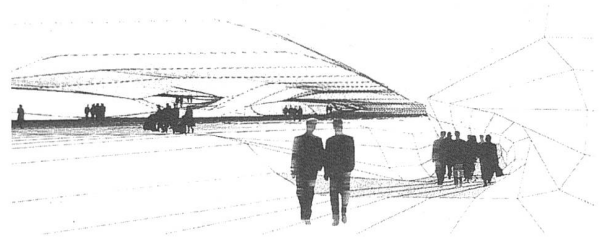
While New Minimalist projects use surface as a means to *mask* the performative, Infrastructuralists use surface as a means to *facilitate* the performative.

The envelope plays a very important role in New Minimalist architecture: as a protective layered surface it serves to sustain the volumetric expression of interior(ity). As the uniformity of surface treatments engenders a pronounced non-identification with the context, it simultaneously affirms the autonomous objectness of the building. Most often opaque at most translucent, the surface of the envelope hermetically seals the performative realm of the interior. Kazuyo Sejima’s “Dormitory for Women” is one of the earlier examples: the building, completely wrapped in a translucent screen encloses an interior world of its own. The almost brutalist concrete facade of Herzog & de Meuron’s “Kunstkiste” in Bonn is perhaps a more blatant reiteration of this theme. The monolithic appeal of the exterior envelope makes it near to impossible to suspect what type of programs it may detain from the viewer. This impervious attribute of the opaque is sometimes also achieved by the use of glass, commonly associated with effects of transparency. In his Kursaal project for San Sebastian, Rafael Moneo uses glass in such a way to achieve this paradoxical effect of opacity. Regardless of its treatment however the surface is conceived as an independent system, that contains the internal program within a compact form.<sup>14</sup>

Infrastructuralism exploits the notion of surface in its topological potential. Often, as in case of the “Yoko-



6 and 7 F.O.A. / Moussavi, Zaero-Polo, Yokohama International Port Terminal, Yokohama, Japan



Yokohama International Port Terminal” designed by Foreign Office Architects, the entire building is collapsed into a continuous surface. The topological treatment of the surface establishes a smooth continuum to the city’s event structure. Essentially open, the surface responds to the changing events of the terminal in a seamless continuity of topological variations. Private and public event-spaces are constantly mediated, never determined as binary absolutes. Topological bifurcations induce spaces for programmatic differentiation and circulation. While the surface as a result of this layering acquires volumetric depth, it also promotes affects of translucency through the continuum of an open non-hierarchical event structure.

#### Ground: Heaviness & Liteness

*The issue of grounding becomes paramount.*

While New Minimalist projects in their reductive blankness appear to be strangely deterritorialized, they simultaneously exude a sense of gravity. Unlike modernist buildings which sought to detach themselves from the groundplane, these buildings are firmly positioned on the ground, sometimes even extend the ground. This desire to reintroduce the notion of gravity connotes a renewed emphasis on density and mass in alliance with the ground plane, perhaps in the feeble attempt to insinuate a resistance to the rootlessness of contemporary urban life.

Infrastructuralism intent on the intensification of urban fluidity can no longer sustain a singular ‘gravitational’ orientation to the groundplane. The topological surface is defined by the prefixes over, under and through enabling a multiplication of orientations, positions and movements.<sup>15</sup> In the Yokohama Urban Ring project, O.M.A. extends the existing groundplane into a ‘thickened’ topological field. By originating a multilevel network of sectionally differentiated connections, irreducible to one singular orientation, the structure becomes multigrounded, and as a result acquires ‘liteness’.

#### Scale: Big

*In the affirmation of a totalizing interiority, the scale of the architectural subject is always presumed to be larger than the scale of the object (externality).*

New Minimalism addresses this “absence” of scale in several ways most obviously however by “Bigness”. While the building envelope of Bahram Shirdel’s “Kansai-Kan Library” measures 165m by 250m, Herzog & De Meuron’s Winery is to be expected to be at least 100m in length. By sheer vastness alone these projects engender their own (a)territorial topographies. While this exaggeration in scale produces effects, almost always exceeding the objective limits of the architectural object, it also (re)introduces the familiar in a strangely deterritorialized manner.

#### Affect: Boredom Two Ways

*As a kind of (hyper) affect, Generic architecture propagates boredom as the simultaneous result of non-affect and total affect.*

Primordial “powerful” forms are employed in order to attain “instant affects of blankness”, as perhaps in recent years only the media was able to achieve. The production of affect in New Minimalism in its externalized propagation of blankness, entails the contingent underexposure of its internalized program. Recalling Venturi’s statement “less is a bore”, simplicity in this way, as a highly compromised formal trajectory effects dullness.

Infrastructuralism proliferates affect largely by its incessant amplification of existing event-structures. Pushing reality to its most extreme, hence broadcasting a kind of (hyper)reality emblematic of Generation X, it taps into the concurrent apathy effected by continual overexposure.



“What popart wants,” Roland Barthes writes in “That Old Thing Art” (1980), “is to desymbolize the object, to release the image from any deep meaning into a simulacral surface.”<sup>16</sup> Where Barthes sees an avantgardist disruption of representation, Baudrillard sees an “end of subversion”, a total integration of the art work into the political economy of the commodity-sign<sup>17</sup>. Both interpretations are of significant relevance to the situation of current critical architectural practice.

Inspired by Foucault, Deleuze & Guattari and others, the work of resistive critical architects often if not always assumed dominant definitions of the negative and/or the deviant even as it moved to revalue them.<sup>18</sup> More often than not, the work of critical architects allowed for the rhetorical reversals of dominant definitions to stand for political gestures as such. This idealization of the other followed a hegelian dialectic (hierarchical versus non-hierarchical, striated versus smooth, arborescent versus rizomatic), operating essentially within a mode of displacement, where one dominant mode was simply replaced by the next.

Architecture, no doubt has become the accommodation of the real. As the concept of difference has been interiorized by a globalizing notion of the Generic, architectural criticism in its former binary framework is no longer sustainable. Consequently we have to rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde outside the symbolic order but as a fracture *within* the order.<sup>19</sup> Can we conceive of a new criticism, which defines itself not through an attack on “that old thing art” (Barthes), not through an embrace of the simulacral commodity sign (Baudrillard), but rather in an expose of “complacent consumption”?<sup>20</sup> Can we think of an architecture, that is referential and simulacral, affective and affectless, critical and complacent? Perhaps the role of a new critical architecture is not to break with the order but to expose it in crisis, to register its points not only of breakdown but of breakthrough, the new possibilities that such a crisis might open up.<sup>21</sup>

While New Minimalism responds to current economic trends in virtually the same way Postmodernism did, namely by selling the already accepted, this time around in a “primordial” wrapping style suggesting “purity” and “universal truth”; Infrastructuralists seize socio-economic trends in their diverse modes of operation, which might be more revealing in the long run. By striving to operate from *within* the order of a globalizing economy, Infrastructuralists might actually succeed to disclose some of its automatisms. “If you can’t beat it”, Warhol suggests, “join it. More, if you enter it totally, you might expose it; that is, you might reveal it’s automatism, even it’s autism, through your own excessive example”.<sup>22</sup>

1 “Aesthetic Capital; The Commodification of Architectural Production”, James Mayo, *MODULUS* 21, p.67

2 “The Condition of Postmodernity”, David Harvey, p.70

3 “Aesthetic Capital; The Commodification of Architectural Production”, James Mayo, *MODULUS* 21, p.70

4 “The Generic City”, Rem Koolhaas, *S,M,L,XL*

5 “The Return of the Real”, Hal Foster, p.164

6 “The Return of the Real”, Hal Foster, p.130

7 “The Return of the Real”, Hal Foster, p.166

8 “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia”, Roger Callois, *October* 31

9 “Towards a New Architecture”, Jeffrey Kipnis, *AD/ Folding in Architecture*

10 “The Return of the Real”, Hal Foster, p.168

11 Term first used in “Recent Koolhaas”, Jeffrey Kipnis, *El Croquis* 79

12 “Eleven Points on Knowledge and Wisdom”, Peter Eisenman, *Anywise*

13 Jeffrey Kipnis in “Recent Koolhaas” defines the term as follows: “The term event-structure is used to indicate all of the social activities and chance events, desirable or not, that an architectural setting stages and conditions. These include but are not limited to the expressed activities of the program.(...)”

14 Rudolfo Machado in this context summarizes this effect quite aptly, when he states, that “As an autonomous architectural system, the surface encapsulates the building in more than one sense: Within its limited thickness and with its volumetric expression, it is meant to condense and deliver the architectural effect that would customarily build up evenly and consistently throughout the building.” (“Monolithic Architecture”, Rudolpho Machado, *Rodolphe el-Khoury*)

15 “Differential Gravities”, Greg Lynn, *Any*, March/April 1994

16 “That Old Thing Art”, Roland Barthes, see also Foster “The Return of the Real”, p.128

17 “Pop-Art of Consumption?”, Jean Baudrillard,

18 “The Myth of the Other”, Franco Rella

19 “The Return of the Real”, Hal Foster, p.157

20 “The Return of the Real”, Hal Foster, p.130

21 “The Return of the Real”, Hal Foster, p.157

22 “The Work of Andy Warhol”, Gary Garrels

