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A tale of (at least) two cities

Colin Davies & Monica Parrinder, *Limited Language*, May 2008

Modernism is built on a foundation of the double, the facsimile and similitude – the repetitions of the machine age. Model T-Fords, Motel chains and Fast Food restaurants are the most obvious – most digestible? – remnants of the modernist production line. At the beginning of the 20th Century, Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project* captures some of the cultural artefacts of reproduction. Neatly noted, transcribed and stored on index cards, this was published posthumously.

The Motel room is a potent reminder of early modernist production. Capturing mobility – place, home and en-suite shower in one – repeatable, Formica utopia. Each room identical, prefabricated buildings like map pins tracing the expanding US road network: checking-in; placing the key on the desk and even the reflections are the same.

As the modern world progressed toward the 21st Century the flow of commerce replaced the pioneering spirit – a colonization of bytes and commodity markets. The office suite replaced the motel room: leather and steel instead of formica and polypropylene. The International style replicated glass, steel and transparency across Europe both eastwards and West. The office space became a crosshair where flow and fixed converge.

‘Doubling-up’ becomes associated with speed: dual-carriageways; twice-the-speed-of-sound and dual-processors are examples of the mathematical double. Mimetic and literal, the double would become a symbol for late modernity. 24/7, 7/11, 9/11 are fractions in the formulae for understanding the last 20 years – the temporal maths of globalization.

An embodiment of this process could be found in Minoru Yamasaki’s 1970’s Twin Towers. When originally built they remained empty – condiments – in a depressed economic landscape. Leading a double life, during the day they towered, dark and gothic, mimicking the political and economic impotency of 1970s America but at night, lit up, the offices, bright and empty, they provided a symbol of the potency of the American Dream. For Jean Baudrillard in ‘The Spirit of Terrorism’ (2003), their ‘architectural graphism’ – 1/1 – marked the end of competition, the end of any original reference in the era of networks and monopoly. “There is, admittedly, in this cloning and perfect symmetry an aesthetic quality, a kind of perfect crime against form, a tautology of form which can give rise, in a violent reaction, to the temptation to break that symmetry, to restore an asymmetry, and hence a singularity.”

When on 9/11 the glass and steel collapsed, the system did not – the architectural DNA already mutated, its genes carried in the information flows of late modern capitalism. Just one example – NY/KL – is Cesar Pelli’s 1998 Petronas Towers, the tallest twin towers in the world.

The Global city is, as Manuel Castells points out, ‘a process’ rather than a physical space. And here is the rub: the city, so long the hub of capitalist production, is now, in this guise at least, dormant. In a recent promotional video Hong Kong branded itself as a ‘portal city’ and

this city branding is not a new phenomena. New York successfully re-branded itself as the 'Big Apple' and Milton Glaser's 'I love New York', which came out in 1976 when the city was experiencing high levels of crime and deprivation, has become a design icon. Branding now increasingly uses the NY skyline as the synecdoche and swoosh of the city. The President of Landor Branding Agency, quoted in Naomi Klein's 'No Logo' (2000), states "products are made in a factory...but brands are made in the mind". This dynamic is reflected in the use of the city skyline as logo or trademark – cities produce aspirations, the soft bedding for brands...

9/11 reminded people just how potent the city skyline has become and, after the event, the space left ached in the news footage and photojournalism flowing out of the mourning city. One passenger on the Staten Island Ferry, looking up at the skyline, spoke of the city losing its two front teeth – a reaction which can only be dreamed of by a brand manager.

A striking counter part to current notions of the city as imagescape – a duplicitous abstraction – is made by Tel Aviv architect Sharon Rotbard: "...in Israeli architecture, the actual object is more powerful than any image or metaphor." He takes as his example the wall and tower, for him the mould of all Israeli architecture. "These are facts cast in concrete."

In 'A Civilian Occupation: the Politics of Israeli Architecture' (2002), Rotbard looks specifically at Homa Umigdal, the first Israeli settlement project built in 1936. "Beyond the fact that the wall was a program, and was destined to become an 'ideology', it was, first and foremost, a wall." – a protective wall but, also, "the non-explicit threat of concrete."

Rotbard suggests that, with Homa Umigdal, if there is any image it is one of 'work in progress' as it was the first settlement point in a strategic network. This is a darker reminder of early modernist production. Capturing the dynamic of motion: the offensive, capture and then locking down of Palestinian land – place, home and en-suite battlements in one – repeatable, Israel as utopia. Each settlement identical, placed like map pins along an expanding Israeli border: staking the land; building the wall and erecting the tower. Similarly today in the architecture of contemporary settlement, the mobile home is more than a hasty construction. Symbolic of mobility, it is 'ambulatory', a 'hyperactive object'. These are what Rotbard calls "acts of modern architecture".

And yet a cityscape – particularly one traced in outline – can't help be but mediated through news coverage. Gaza, Beirut and Haifa have all become fragments in a skyline spliced with conflict. Last year, staring out from a hotel room in central Tel Aviv, the skyline could not be seen (like the colours in the Israeli flag, blue against white) without the scene conflating with images from newsreel footage, day in and day out, 24/7.

The skyline, like a doppelganger, becomes a composite or double exposure – depicting rising smoke, pockmarks and sirens – the collateral damage of too many visual-bites on CNN, CBS, BBC and Al Jazeera. Doubles, facsimile, similitude, simulation – the repetitions of any logo, emblem or sign – become part of the visual mapping we use to (mis)understand the world.

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