

Log

WINTER 2011

Observations on
architecture and the
contemporary city

29° 57' N, 31° 6' E

Cairo-Al Fayoum Desert Road, Hadayek El Ahram

In the ever-changing landscape of Egypt, as events this winter so clearly have demonstrated, one thing remains steadfast: the pyramids of Giza. Driving north toward Cairo from the oasis city Al Fayoum, one passes the walled community of Hadayek El Ahram (The Pyramid Gardens), home to some of Egypt's more "affluent" people. The suburb looks onto the vast, undeveloped Pyramid Plateau surrounding the great pyramids that stand at the western edge of the capital. Here, just 20 kilometers from the center of Cairo, the desert sands are lined by only a few billboards, streetlights, fences, and road signs – themselves dilapidated signs of the modern that pale beside the enduring power of the ancient and its image. In Egypt, heritage is the past, the present, and the foreseeable future.

21

\$15.00



Parametricism And Pied Piperism: Responding to Patrik Schumacher

Editor's Note: *This edited transcript is of an exchange between SCI-Arc Director Eric Owen Moss and Patrik Schumacher after the latter's talk at the school in 2010.*

ERIC OWEN MOSS: Let me say I have huge appreciation for the colossal self-confidence and enormous effort required to wrap your arms around contemporary architecture and to insist on a number of organizational categories that circumscribe architecture and redefine its mission. Congratulations. I always thought one of the keys to architecture was to outwork everyone else. You're certainly doing that.

You rely on linguistics in a way that I don't think you acknowledge. You know, Shakespeare made a comment about "a rose by any other name," which suggests that labeling is not a surrogate for meaning. You're in love with labeling – and one of the fascinating things about the act of naming is that it may facilitate a logic of nomenclature while confusing the search for the meaning the logic claims to deliver. You should acknowledge your love of labeling.

I remember submitting my dad's poetry to Farrar, Straus and Giroux, who returned the material to me with a letter that said: "We don't really know how to locate this text within our publishing subdivisions. Is this religion? History? Linguistics? Poetry? It doesn't conform to our categories of production." So ipso facto, the "poetry" was exorcised because it didn't confirm Farrar's labeling pro forma. Be careful that you don't eliminate instincts in architecture that don't fit the a priori parametric formulations

Years ago a well-known religious thinker, an Anglican named Malcolm Muggeridge, made a comment that stuck in my head. Muggeridge was a fan of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn at the time the Russians were putting Solzhenitsyn into the Gulag. Do you know what Muggeridge said? He said the Russians could cover the earth with concrete, but the concrete would inevitably crack, and out of the cracks would come Solzhenitsyn. An architecture metaphor for sure, don't you think? Maybe you're pouring too much concrete.

Do you know Oswald Spengler?

PATRIK SCHUMACHER: Sure.

EOM: Your efforts have a fascinating antecedent, Spengler's *Decline of the West*. Almost nobody reads Spengler anymore. I think the book was written in the years after World War I. But Spengler, more than any conceptual thinker I know, relies on categorical imperatives. The book is a stupendous effort to organize, bracket, and label all of human history. You've reduced the task, but Spengler's your namesake. You take on a smaller piece – architecture. He took on everything. His is a wonderful act of will. I remember one section called blood over money, which was a critique of the notion, so predictably American, that in the end, everything is about business. And if you don't subscribe to that, you're somehow not a grown up. But Spengler noted that there was something intractable, deeper than the "business is business" proposition. Blood over money. Dionysius over Apollo, in other words. And the point was that those who analyze without reference to blood make an important omission. You inherited a Spenglerian antecedent, but you've omitted the blood. You're alone with Apollo, I think.

You also characterized Newton as a systematizer. But like most systematizers – Freud, Marx, Darwin – he omitted some essentials, electromagnetism in particular. You'll argue that, notwithstanding the omissions, the ontology galvanizes a movement, assures a clear direction, and above all, a Pied Piperism with lots of followers, and in the end something for the future to build on. The problem is, "something to build on" so often becomes a policy of established intransigence. It has to be dismantled along with its adherents, who become obstacles to any contrary instincts.

And it looks like you've become the Parametric Pied Piper.

I prefer a skepticism of all ordering mechanisms, rather than an allegiance to any one. The stretch between the two possibilities may be where a truth lies: the tension between options rather than the selection of one and the elimination of the others.

Remember the appendix to Hitchcock and Johnson's *International Style*? Philip told us how we could all be modern architects. And the Museum of Modern Art was his enforcer. Just follow the rules. And that codification didn't begin the modern era. That book and his exhibit ended modern architecture as speculation and began modernism as style. Study. Learn. Replicate. Pruitt-Igoe wasn't the culprit. Philip-style was the culprit. It could be argued that he did the same with so-called deconstruction. He used to tell me deconstruction was about diagonal lines.

When Darwin sailed by the cliffs of Chile, he looked up, aghast. He knew incremental evolution could never account for what he saw. You can read his doubts in *On the Origin of Species*. Your hypothesis should include some speculation on what you may have left out. Today I think they call what Darwin suspected “catastrophism.” Catastrophism is a radical and unanticipated rejection of a predicted order – a good category to include in contemporary architecture, don’t you think?

Marx is part of your historiography, but he never anticipated the ingenuity of contemporary capitalism to reimagine itself. Capitalism will be what is in perpetuity, Marx thought. Its inflexibility guaranteed the advent of the proletarian state, he said. Nope. We’re still waiting. Marx missed the capitalist dexterity quotient. Dialectical materialism doesn’t work if the thesis is self-correcting. That inhibits the development of the antithesis. Both Marx and Hegel missed the course correction capacity in their thesis/antithesis/synthesis formulation.

The historic efforts to codify meaning in human affairs are all around us. They will shape our thought, if we allow such unequivocal paradigms to define us. But I would argue that never are any of these hypotheses intrinsically so, and the more history moves, the more we evaluate these hypotheses in retrospect, the more we see their flaws and the less plausible is the argument for yet another regulatory pro forma.

I applaud the power of your effort to demand a new order. That gives me something to attack, and architecture needs enemies, within and without. Contemporary architecture has too many friends.

The parametric hypothesis is extrinsically so because you insist on it, you label it, you argue for it, you build it, and you deny a plausible opposition. Will gives it its life. And will is another category you omit. Faustian man, remember? Will and intellect give it a life, and that makes it plausible in the realm of ideas. But it doesn’t make it intrinsically or exclusively so.

I made a book a few years ago, called *Gnostic Architecture*, anticipating this recent effort on your part. It’s conceptually antithetical to your stated mission. It insists on improvisation, ambivalence, and the uselessness of charts. The unknown is the rule, the known the exception, in perpetuity. As I recall, Zarathustra said he “would rather guess than know.” Parametrics doesn’t countenance the guessing postulate.

One other point: it seems to me that the appeal of the work of Zaha Hadid was how rare, how idiosyncratic, how personal it was. You’ve simultaneously added something to that and removed something. I think, in a sense, you’ve homogenized the anomalous, described a policy position, and in doing

so, you've depersonalized the content. This is an imprecise example, but 100 Sagrada Familias mean something different than one – and an unfinished one, at that.

Arguing for “differentiation” as a regulation, rather than an instinct for exceptions, is as if differentiation ratified a democratic position for variation. But it doesn't. I don't know actually why, as a conceptual tactic, the “differentiated” internal content would necessarily be indicated by a “differentiated” external object. Regulating the form of choice means choice is gone. The modernists, of course, argued that the box allowed the most enduring internal flexibility. You argue that differentiation is a truer indication of the same prospect. But it seems to me, having recognized the inadequacy of the modern definition, you would also be skeptical of your own remodeling of the modern rule system – alleging the same variable social priority, apparently, but with a new form language prescription.

We had a discussion here in the thesis jury the other day – you may have been in that one – regarding the Louvre, once somebody's house and now a museum. So plausible differentiation needn't follow the parametric formulation.

I can feel you love making the parametric argument. But your case may say as much about you as it does about architecture. It's what you guys require to validate going ahead. Forgive me for the street-corner psychoanalysis. And again, nowhere a scintilla of a minutia of an iota of doubt. Why are you doing this? Because it's so? Or because you need it to be so? No inkling that something's left out? I always thought that the unique voices in architecture included both an extreme self-confidence and a deep skepticism of the consequences of that self-confidence.

Thanks very much. I thought it was a terrific lecture, very unusual.

PS: I just want to pick up a few of your points. The first thing to note is, yes, no system is perfect; there will be another crisis of parametricism, although I don't know when and how. The triggering conditions for this would be either shifts in the societal environment, which demand further architectural evolution, or a kind of internal exhaustion of the paradigm, but that kind of exhaustion could also lead to a new trajectory of development within parametricism in the form of a further subsidiary style. A crisis will come. That's for sure. But to say that methodical system building is in itself a problem because there were a series of prior system building efforts the results of which did not last forever – that makes no sense.

Newton was replaced by Einstein, and Einstein could only exist because Newton had prepared the ground. In the same way parametricism is building on modernism. Contemporary society is changing and mutating, but it's building on the material achievements of the Fordist production paradigm.

EOM: Do you think the world gets better?

PS: Absolutely. And I can give you examples.

EOM: There was a political theorist at Harvard, Samuel P. Huntington, who offered an alternative definition of the future. He died in 2008. His prognosis was that the 21st century would replicate the social, political, and religious oppositions of the 19th century, and that the 20th century didn't count. What's "new," he said, is likely to be a rerun of what's old, quite literally. Doesn't build on the past, improve it, make it better, or worse, and so on. A very different way to look at the parametrics of history. History stays the same? Could be. Gets different? Perhaps. Improves? Not clear. Sequential? Chronological? Doubtful. It's not necessary that we agree with Huntington, but I don't want my enemies to go away.

PS: For me, there is a meta-category, which I didn't get to. The base category in my philosophical meta-discourse would still be productivity. In this respect I agree with Marx. But productivity must not only be measured in output by time unit, but output by time unit considering working conditions, and now we also have to consider sustainability and the ecological burden that production imposes. But if you put these three factors together, productivity is the alpha and omega of everything, of life, of freedom, of security, of charity, and that's why it is the ultimate base category. I measure everything with respect to productivity in the sense of the productivity/vitality of a civilization, a civilization that increasingly sets itself free from the blind material forces it faces in its environment. That's progress. All stages of this trajectory contributed to where we are now. Therefore, to say, for instance, that the systems of modernism were a mistake only because they went into crisis, which allowed something else to grow on top and beyond it, is really unreasonable. You just have to take the slice of time far enough apart and you see progress. I grew up in the 1960s in a nation of 60 million, in Germany, where every single individual, without exception, had a higher standard of living, material plenty, and freedom than Louis Quatorze, the Sun King of France. Every single

one of them had a heated house, running water, health care/ medication, a car outside the front door, a telephone, was connected around the world by switching on the TV, taking the flight to a holiday destination at least once a year, and all that was universally available. That's what Fordism/modernism delivered. That's what the post-Fordist network society is building upon.

EOM: Come on, Patrik . . . there are different kinds of progress. Material progress is not synonymous with intellectual or cultural growth. Sometimes they facilitate one another, sometimes they contradict. The world only gets better if you leave out the part that doesn't. Yuli Daniel and Andrei Synyavsky, two more Gulag candidates, wrote about a critical distinction any architecture pro forma should continue to make. One they called "freedom from." That's your material category – Marx; life as production; food, water, housing, and medicine. That leaves "freedom to," which your belief in continuing progress omits. Freedom to do what? The answer should be supplied, one architect at a time.

PS: As well. What I'm looking at, for instance, is contemporary corporate organization and the freedom and participatory culture they require to become even more productive – I mean, of course, the world is full of contradictions . . .

EOM: Let's talk about some of them.

PS: Dyssynchronous development, brutality – of course, I know all of this, but at the same time, we need to look at which social structures, which spaces, which cultural tropes, which moral sensibilities produce the next level of our civilization. You have Silicon Valley, for instance, with a certain culture, the roots of which come out of the counter-culture and the social revolutions of the '60s and '70s, and that's where you have to look. You have to look at the most advanced, most intelligent, most productive social organizations, their culture, their sensibilities, their way of working, their spaces, and see if you can contribute to them, can lift them further onto the next level. That's what I see the avant-garde of architecture to be doing. If we can speak to them and create spaces for their next level, then we know we're on the right track.

EOM: Aren't you using the exception to make a universal rule? The fact that parametrics has become more plausible and desirable in your terms, and of special interest to students,

doesn't mean it's gained credence as a measure of architectural content. The converse might also be true, that its greatest value was as a speculative form language option, not as a regulation. I'm for the Penelope theory of architecture. Odysseus's wife took apart at night what she made during the day.

PS: I believe that we're living in a world society where certain state-of-the-art solutions will ripple through and be picked up quickly everywhere. I think that mobile phones, Google, social network sites, all of this . . .

EOM: One at a time. I've got the same list . . . just never considered the items unequivocal assets. We should be more cautious about universal device acclaim. What you call communication is often formulaic. And we operate within that a priori formulation or we can't use the tools. Email facilitates certain exchanges and trivializes others. Speed isn't necessarily conducive to thoughtfulness. What you list as assets are simultaneously assets and liabilities. The tools made the world different. Now it's our job to say what's better and what's worse, in order, perhaps, to make what's worse better.

I couldn't sit and listen to your presentation for an hour or so and not be moved by it. Thank you very much.