

NO MATERIAL EVIDENCE

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“An advanced, technological, urban environment is a totally manufactured one. Interaction with the environment tends more and more towards information processing in one form or another and away from interactions involving transformation of matter. The very means and visibility for material transformation become more remote and recondite. Centres for production are increasingly located outside the urban environment in what are euphemistically termed “Industrial Parks”. In these grim, remote areas the objects of daily use are produced by increasingly obscure processes, and the matter transformed is increasingly synthetic and unidentifiable. As a consequence, our immediate surroundings tend to be read as “forms” that have been punched out of unidentifiable, indestructible plastic or unfamiliar metal alloys. It is interesting to note that in an urban environment construction sites become small theatrical arenas, the only places where raw substances and the processes of their transformation are visible and random distribution is tolerated.”

Robert Morris, *Notes on Sculpture - Part 4*, 1968.¹

The environmental art and visionary architecture of the Sixties unveiled mass culture and the artifice of communication. In reacting to them, they seem to have been searching for the chance, the unconscious perception, the meaninglessness hidden behind industrial mass production. These explorations, however, were not a yearning to return to a supposed “naturalness” that had been lost, but were instead indicators of a new type of material evidence, unsurprisingly defined as “theatrical”, which involved the audience in a game of analogue perception. The “transformation processes” and “raw materials” mentioned by Robert Morris are nothing but allegories of the division of labor and the synthesis of the machine. We can recall faceless products that global distribution manages to dislocate in ever new combinations. The material is *crude* in its evident visual-tactile nature but is supremely *artificial* in its production process. The ambiguity of contemporary postmodern progress here is already fully delineated. It is visceral not for its *physicality* but for the exchange speed with which it recombines discrete parts. The “random distribution” mentioned by Morris is a sign of the nomadism of constructive fragments that remain disconnected whilst being able to be connected to anything else.

It seems, to some extent, to return to what the Modern Movement abhorred: stratified construction, *cladding* as masking, and the application of superficial surfaces. All of this denies the unified hierarchy, perception of transparency and tectonic expression that the twentieth century had canonized. The building site is no

longer an expression of the truth of technique but the economic forces that dominate it. This fragments reality into specialized parts, related to a pulverized market of semi-finished works, dividing hidden *raw* work and the visible *finished* work in order to increase the effectiveness of communication (and commerce).

The kind of building construction most akin to the mechanisms of the Post-Fordist market is additive: in it, every part is adjacent and connected to the other but not integrated with them. There must be maintained a degree of autonomy and flexibility of use that allows it to be detached from other parts to follow the needs of a volatile market that requires exploitation of the real estate of differentiated parts. In new buildings, the interior is replaced, but not the front (or vice versa), the plant design equipment can change; the usage is modified by integrating the shell with new functional partitions. The life of a structure involves stratification without sedimentation, a combination of contiguous realities that are never tied together completely. At the dividing between between different building parts, cavities, crevices, passages and bays are created for future usage that are always left open in the case that the use, user, tenant, or property, are changed. The site becomes the battleground of conflicting requirements, implemented by several companies that work in parallel but independent processes from each other. Construction is affected by this: to allow for the flexibility of use, there must be the use of *light* parts that can be added together as a whole. Production processes can be complex in different ways but they are all related to the skills of a workforce, either primary (the raw), or specialized (the finite). No middle ground between these two extremes can exist: one actor conscious of the whole process is the General Contractor

coordinating it all, but he or she does not build. This type of construction has an American origin: it is the United States that, in contrast with the ideology of Modern Europe, invented the construction process of industrialized parts that are minimal and generic and that are layered upon each other: *frame, infill, cladding, sheathing, interior and exterior finishes*, are words that, appearing along with the *balloon* (in wood) or the *steel frame* (steel), have become the preserve of the entire Western world with varying degrees of thickness in their wrapping. The internal and external finishing touches that hide the structure and the systems are designed by multiple designers who provide parallel contexts with often very different clients.

In recent decades, the need to save energy has led to a more careful use of plant equipment and with the desire to reduce the use of primary sources, it has generally been decided to implement greater thickness in passive building shells so that heat is trapped within its mass. In a world now dominated by the division of lightweight industrialized parts, this need has not led to a reduction in the stratification of walls but rather its increase, both in the number of levels which are utilized and in their thickness. The marketing of insulation and finishing has benefited from this and building sites have positively welcomed the increase as it is aligned with the divisions with which it is organized. The black line in a building plan that marks the boundary of a building has become thicker (with this increase of layers of thermal insulation, we can liken it to the spreading of coats) but it is also divided into more skins (through glass curtain walls interposed with air gaps). Such thickening creates an interregnum at the boundary between the inside and outside that denies both the monolithic form (the building

is made of layers) and transparency (windows multiply in a game of reflections which has instigated the search into the ambiguity of shells — as an example we can consider the *Light Construction* exhibition by Terence Riley, or the research on mirror facades by the artist Dan Graham).² To say that this fragmentation of parts of a building (and the site) is the mirror of the postmodern division between signifier and signified is almost an understatement. Never before, has the architectural language been so free to choose its own constructive expression from so many options. All of this is because of the mutual independence between visual representation and the divided materiality that supports it. The architect does not have to respond to the imperative of building holistically and to bind expression and materiality. The signifier-cladding is an applied decoration that can either mimic a monolithic construction (which actually does not exist) or assume a graphic immediacy independent of any visual weight. Tectonics and anti-tectonics have become two sides of the same coin: the building oscillates between imitation and concealed masking without a solution of continuity. In this logic, the traditional expression of the major elements of a building is not at all excluded; rather, it becomes only one of the possible options, and an option in the general economic concern of a structure. Tectonics is revealed as an artifice, perhaps as it always was, always possible but no longer necessary. Buildings are equal in their assembly but appear different in their material expression. The building site reifies this Babel of options: they are planned but can also become variations during construction and decided upon at the last minute. In the same way that building space and materials are divided, so also is the construction time divided up into parcels.

Grafting, a term currently fashionable that describes the connection between different structures, is internal to each building. The supporting structure is a perforable frame and is divided into parts to be joined that are never visible. It is always hidden, framing fittings but not sustaining them. The exterior facade is the signifier/mask that supports the fetishism of material detached from the whole. The layering of lightweight building envelopes has led to an anthology of diaphragms and screenings that have liberated the front elevation from compliance with window patterns and floor heights. Passages such as cavity walls, pillars, shafts, false ceilings and raised floors are the vehicles of the flows of the building: they can be cut within the structures but it is better if they are made in the separations between the layers and thus assume an interstitial nature. The internal claddings are partial finishings tied to a specific user and time, perhaps only that of a *tenant*, a temporary resident.

The pulverisation of construction parts sometimes makes them interchangeable in their structural roles: becoming a wall or a frame, an ongoing or short-term system which creates unexpected relationships. There is no longer only the pairing of the sustaining/sustained but the work of solidarity between structures and filling as occurs with *balloon frames*, where sheathing combines with the studs that make up the diaphragm wall, thus providing the brace for the entire outer shell. The two parts are clearly separate in form and assembly work but are united in forming a new type of composite wall. With the miniaturization of the supporting element (but also of that which is supported) multiple readings of the construction roles are formed that dissolve sharp boundaries. As there is no longer an evident hierarchy between supporting and

supported, there is not even a gradation between the principle and secondary parts: there remains a widespread movement of roles between the different components of a building. This relativity can lead to both a reduction of minute fractal parts and the exaltation of a single structural element which becomes the only material signifier of the building, even when it is not alone. How many times in the last years have we seen architectural awards for, and publications on, single materials? Even this type of reading, while celebrating traditional elements such as wood or stone, is the daughter of the alienation of the part from the whole, of form from materiality and of language from space. Construction, and with it the building site, assumes a virtual dimension and displays the seeming identity of a building but also the possibility of becoming something other, at multiple levels and stages. This takes place not only due to the separation of the form from the technique, but the relative reading of the latter.

The fragility and uncertainty of technologies related to the arrival of new products on a consumerist building market, the differentiated management of different areas of a building, the mutability of real estate needs in the short term, all demand a profound modification of the planning and construction process:

- they require an integrated design with the commercial and real estate management (the so-called *project management*) but are, in reality, divided into different technical skills that correspond to the specializations of the building (structures, finishes, plants, raw and finished work).

- they make it so that design no longer comes before execution but is temporally superimposed on it. Variations during construction and subsequent changes that take place after the completion of a building trig-

ger a time stream where each step changes the reading of an artifact.

- they require a decision-making process in which the spatial-construction fragmentation and continuous changes can extend the design process during and after construction. Such indefinite postponement can be a nightmare for the designer in that it continually undermines the identity that has been designed for a building. It may, alternatively, transform the building site into a sort of *open-source* where the project is continually reviewed along with experimentation using new construction solutions.

In this scenario, the building doesn't become the resolution of the project but rather its projection into multiple parallel dimensions, leaving open the possibility of revisions, even when the building site has started work and, often, even after its conclusion. This process is more like a continuous *restyling* of an existing building (without the idea of the preservation of identity of its original facies) than the new construction of a completed unit. The architect has to make those involved realise that he or she will need to make adjustments to the plans, during and after construction. If this potential uncertainty is incorporated into the planning process of a structure, it can give a major boost to such open design. It will end up defining a number of public nodes and will leave a number of interchangeable appendices open: this is the only possibility in controlling the growth of a structure in a process that is dominated by the unforeseen, where time is working not to consolidate but to multiply architectural identities in strange iridescent semantics. Even the definition of a *brand* image of a building, often represented as a single iconic symbol separable from all others does not exclude the presence of grey sections, deliberately anon-

ymous that can change as it remains untouched. Such an open and market condition empowers clients, users and the manufacturer to propose constructive alternatives during construction. Some have no impact on the overall picture apart from some functional role if in the planning the desire to control everything is left aside and a margin of variability is included thus resulting in a building structure that can no longer be considered unitary. The duality between identity and flexible elements fragments the perception of a structure but builds a continuous emergent dialectic that changes with each project. Commercial Functionalism imposed by increasingly numerous consultants would seem to reduce the role of the architect to defining the facade and external cosmetics alone. In truth, the real challenge today for the executive designer, who is required to deliver a song sheet to follow at the building site, is the definition of coexisting parts with a use and interpretation that can be differentiated. The logic of consumerism that dominates the site organization triggers a new pragmatic, experimental functionalism that seems to proceed empirically by following the dictates of the market, but instead requires a more subtle projective imagination that must consider the building as a composite palimpsest in which multiple needs characterized by different temporalities coexist. The timing of structures, which are orphans of classical *firmitas* (solidity), as well as the forward projection of the contemporary, presents itself as a mirror of today's complexity. The building site becomes the vast plane in which this coexistence plays out: it is consolidated, but can also dissolve to recompose itself in new configurations. To be able to perceive this objective, which is formed in equal parts by identity and otherness, in the unfinished of a structure in the making is a challenge

for contemporary architecture.

1.

Robert Morris, *Notes on Sculpture - Part 4*, in id. *Continuous Project Altered Daily, the Writings of Robert Morris*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1993, p.123.

2.

The first is the catalogue of the exhibition: Terence Riley, *Light Construction*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1995. To understand the architectural thinking of Graham, see the interviews contained in: Adachiara Zevi and Pietro Valle, *Dan Graham, Half Square Half Crazy*, Charta, Milan 2005.