**Evidence and Instrumentality: A Pathography**

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I'd like to sketch out two seemingly distinct features of the contemporary architectural mind, and in doing so suggest that— as *instrumental* dimensions of our present condition—the two are perhaps not so dissimilar as they first appear. I'll finish by discussing the consequences of those two features.

I. Equipmental Instrumentality
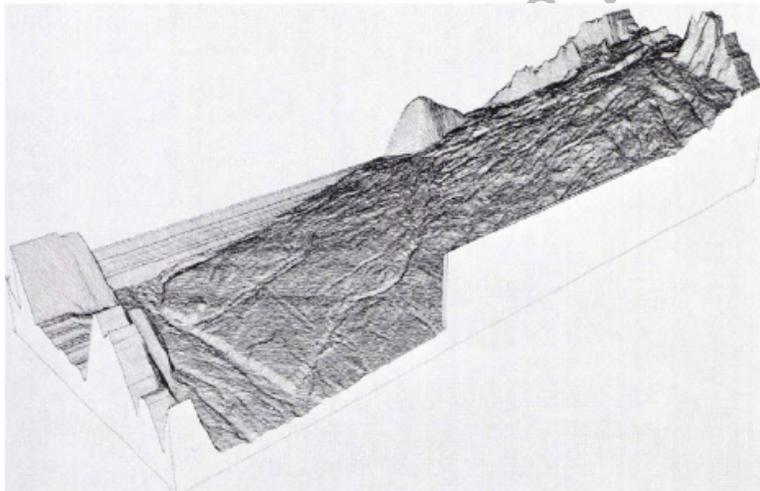
First: this image, which appears to be specific but is in fact exceedingly generic. It was produced in the early 1970's, and it marks one of the earliest expressions of certain instrumental arrangements crucial to the emergence of a fully automated electronic control surface.

Described in a technical report at that time as "a statistical representation of the continuous surface of the ground,"[1] we can today recognize it as the

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[1] William H. Young, "Production Mapping with Orthophoto Digital Terrain Models," *Photogrametric Engineering and Remonte Sensing* 44, no. 12 (December 1978): 1521–1536.

instrumental precursor to an entire suite of technologies whose dominance within our field is now virtually assured.

We are undoubtedly perched on the precipice of a full disciplinary immersion in a family of instruments whose principle aim is to unify and integrate and 'visualize' hugely disparate data sets, ranging from cost and risk analyses to biometric and structural information. What's more, this integration will almost inevitably take place *algorithmically*, which is to say: automatically. These instruments are predicated on the establishment of a statistical-electrical reciprocity, in which the concept of environment is defined exclusively as *that which can be represented as information in the form of discrete electrical signals*. Within their technical details, mathematical analysis and the concept of nature do not so much correspond as merge indistinguishably.

Though they take many forms—ranging from landscape monitoring systems to building information management software (Figures 2, 3)—these instruments ultimately lean upon the tacitly neopositivist metaphysics of the environmental and ecological sciences, which reassert in their conceptual objects the myth of an objective and naturalized nature.

Beyond the banality of technical acumen, architects and urbanists have taken virtually no interest in understanding these objects, instead summoning them for use-value alone. I've spent some time now looking at the almost numbingly mundane details of their production, and I can report back that they are not what they appear to be. They do not contain stable or immutable 'facts' regarding our environmental conditions, and they certainly do not reveal substantial causal relationships around which we might fashion technical remedies commensurate with our condition.

Here, then, is the first instrumental dimension, which belongs to the specific *equipmental arrangement* of contemporary practice. It amounts to a kind of servile lusting after the products of the environmental technosciences; products that architects and urbanists know virtually nothing about, but which are rapidly reorganizing our pursuits around a managerial posture whose practical results are, historically-speaking, often questionable at best.

This managerial logic—which reduces the rich mystery of existence down to *a set of problems to be solved*—conveys a style of reasoning that the design disciplines, in their present quandary, find irrefutable, and therefore utterly irresistible. Through our equipment, we internalize the manager's naïve opportunism, which repels critique not by direct refutation, but simply through absorption into a kind of teenage-patriarch smile; a confidence, without subtlety or fear, which once motivated dreams and ideals, but now swallows and digests them in silence.

Our fascination with these practices and technical products has slipped over into a kind of intellectual eroticism without bounds, which today releases a thousand and one neopositivist perversions throughout our schools and profession; thermal-energetic mappings, biological and ecological models, climatological and demographic data, etc.

Certainly such information is not useless. Rather it is simply far more complicated than it first appears. Once upon a time these practices and their conceptual products were uncontroversially situated within the language of progress. It would require tremendous naiveté to situate them there today.

All of which raises a fundamental question: Why our submission to a set of disciplines with no more demonstrable access to truth than our own? Why our obsession, our lusting? Where does it find its energy, its impulse?

II. Juridical–Institutional Instrumentality

That question brings us to this image, a photograph from 1946. It's one of the earliest known depictions of an event we are all now familiar with: the open-jury architectural examination—which in the postwar years came to replace the closed-door evaluations characteristic of the Beaux-arts pedagogic model.

We have exceedingly few historical accounts of this pedagogic shift, and those that do exist confine themselves to a vantage point from which they could not possibly discern its associated epistemic consequences.

Linger for a moment on the student's face. Let's imagine that what we're seeing is the not the sort of momentary surprise we see so regularly today, induced perhaps by the adolescent behavior of one's supposed mentors. But rather that what we are witness to in this image is a more generalized bewilderment; the sweeping shock associated with having been displaced from a state of non-discursive extensivity to a gridded field of necessarily reductive orality, which suddenly and reflexively demands that all architectural intellection adhere to a form of reasoning that is, at base, *juridical*.

If we step outside of ourselves for a moment, can we grasp the significance of having so silently and neatly inverted the relationship between objects and words?

In that moment, acts of making that previously went by the name 'architecture,' were suddenly transplanted to an institutional framework that took as its basis the American legal system—a system that in turn takes as its base a fundamentally positivist, evidentiary and deductive view of truth.

Within this psychology, thought—now embryonically conceived as "theory"—is posited as the star witness at the trial of the architectural object, and the student-architect is forced into the position of a falsely sincere barrister whose obligation it is to defend an object, no matter its poverty or guilt. From within the womb of this seemingly mundane, even innocuous, institutional rearrangement emerged a style of reasoning we now know as "architectural theory."

In other words, the '68 generation, which today we most closely associate with laying the foundations of architectural theory, was the first to be required to *speak* alongside their objects. This was not a feature of the Beaux-Arts pedagogic model, and it catalyzed a kind of unseen reversal within the architectural process that has carried with it a concomitant demand that words be used as external legitimizations for a form of aesthetic expression that had never before required *justification*—description, even explanation perhaps, but never this specific model of legalistic justification.

Seen in this way, we can now begin to comprehend architectural theory as a remarkably refined category of mental self-defensive fitness, exercised regularly against institutional-epistemic conditions that could neither be altered nor ignored.

This mentality now dominates all of architecture education, and I've wondered since I was a student whether "architectural theory" is capable of shedding the legacy of instrumental logic bestowed upon it. Or would we be better served—if only because theory itself is now a form of limited-liability self-institutionalization—to speak of the creation of a more generalized

philosophy of design? Under present technological conditions that form of philosophy carries within it the possibility of attaining the fecundity and richness that once belonged to the philosophies of language and life, before they were eviscerated as living practices by Anglo-American analytical thought.

The question is not a simple matter of semantics, as some would say, but rather of the historical baggage now carried by an entire image of thought, which reproduced itself for two generations through a set of dynamic arguments, but which has now been resituated in field of technical and ethical conditions for which it has no language.

And here the merging completes itself, because it is precisely those technical and ethical demands that today produce the impulse for the specific forms of evidence that now proliferate in our schools and profession. What better foundation for one's legal case today than the irrefutable eyewitness accounts of instrumentation that by design make visible the invisible, that quantify and calculate by sight? And yet the fact that the jury finds such evidence compelling does not in any way guarantee a more compelling architectural object.

III. The User

A ongoing coalescing has taken place among two forms of instrumentalism—the equipmental, and the juridical-institutional—and within the frame of that fusing process emerges a rather unusual philosophical phenomenon, seen in this image (Figure 5): the anti-subjective subject known as "the user."

The user is an ontological platform that under previous forms of theoretical description would be called a "subject-type," but which now, for having been formed within a framework that denies such categories, requires a lengthier description.

Which is to say: because it exists principally in relation to an *interface*—because, for it, interaction has replaced socialization—the user is formed within a technical apparatus designed specifically to evade and undercut the spatial and perceptual distinctions between subjects and objects that define Enlightenment reasoning. [This needs expansion, but for now suffice it to say that the interface doesn't have a subject because it isn't an object; it's an environment.]

Strung between the reductive metaphysics of the environmental technosciences and the pragmatism of the American legal model, the architect-as-user cannot hope for more than a partial existence. This novel configuration, which exploits the hidden anthropotechnical ambiguities between organs and hardware, has displaced not simply the subject of architecture, but the entire myth of subjectivity to which acts of making had previously belonged.

And yet, to be clear, the poverty of the user has nothing at all to do with its technological immersion *per se*, but rather with the simple fact that its potential for *imaging itself and its way of life otherwise* is always-already made subservient to the supposedly superior truth-demands of our conjoined instrumentalisms.

IV. Conclusions

When it thinks of itself, and its place on the stage of reality, architecture willfully overestimates its role. Those overestimations are, in a sense, what have constituted a form of thought we refer to as urbanism: that is, thinking about architecture's externalities after the death of modern city planning. And yet, however delusional our urban daydreams, they are nonetheless essential for imagining the possibilities contained within the architectural reasoning.

At present architecture faces a condition in which its willful overestimations of itself are being asked—perhaps demanded—to take a highly specific form: namely 'data.' But insofar as it capitulates with that demand, the

architectural mind remains always-already set within the register of managerial logic, which for its lack of subtlety is incapable of challenging the ways of life it has been tasked with sustaining. Put differently, and perhaps too simplistically, it may well be that our most pressing environmental problem is a deeply buried impulse towards imagining life merely as a set of problems in need of solution.

So in other words, urbanism is at present rather heroically tiptoeing around the central problem, which in fact is not a *problem* at all (not in the narrow technical sense in which we now conceive that term) but rather a twinned *project*. On the one hand: the gradual, patient erasure of dreadful ways of living that continually find their alibis in our so-called solutions. At the same time (and here we confront the absurdly difficult part): to carry out that erasure in ways that do not amount to a repudiation of all that is excessive and unjustifiable. In other words, *to reimagine our ways of living without organizing a cold, barren, negation of life.*

The bastions of rationality in which the technical sciences used to operate are collapsing—but we have moved into them, we must live in them. All of this requires a countervailing force—which of itself would constitute a kind of *ecological urbanism*—to resist the rote scientization of all ecological sensibilities. The great promise of something like ecological design rests not in its ability to fashion terminal and partial palliatives for sustaining our degenerate modes of civilized existence, but in its capacity "to create concepts that are always new;" to foment a biophilic disposition that does not materially undermine itself. To foment, in other words, something like a *philosophy,* teeming with ideas for living—not merely surviving—amidst the suspect moral certitude of objective environmentalism.