

CALL TO ORDER

Sustaining Simplicity in Architecture



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The following is an interview with Rodolphe el-Khoury, Dean of the University of Miami School of Architecture and Nader Tehrani, Dean of the Irwin S. Chanin Cooper Union School of Architecture and principal of NADAAA.

Introduction

Your lecture inaugurates a series titled "Call to Order". It is premised on an observation: It seems that the pendulum is swinging back in favor of a minimal and quasi-naïve architecture.

Just as digital media and CNC fabrication are demonstrating that lines don't have to be straight, that building components don't have to be linear nor standardized, that freeform is possible and even economical, that in fact anything is possible, a number of architects around the world are deliberately choosing the linear, the orthogonal, the generic. They are saying that precisely because buildings could have any form that they shouldn't.

Now I don't think this ostensibly applies to NADAAA and you may be wondering why we invited you to inaugurate this series? And you would be right in suspecting that we see you aligning with the "Call to Order" on another more fundamental level. While you may not share the formal language of many of the other speakers in the series, you do converge with regards to history, typology, and urban morphology.

REK Could you comment on the new phenomenon that we are observing, and then perhaps confirm or deny our assumption about the orientation of NADAAA?

NT First, it may be important to say something about our trajectory of work over the first twenty five years of practice, much of which took canonical organizations as a starting point, but then placed emphasis on elaboration and mannerism. Also, as a process, we always started

with material studies as the foundation of architectural actions, with the aggregation of building blocks as basis for configurations that would, in turn, enable architectural forms—whether they be simple, complex, whole or fragmented. This resulted in a very productive generation of work that ended around 2010 as I dissolved Office dA, however, with the launching of NADAAA, while we still had the arsenal of techniques we had developed prior, we placed more emphasis on critically evaluating our own process. This began a new generation of work that is now focused more on the editorial process, on curation and establishing what is irreducible in each work.

You'll note that even though there are continuities in relation to history, type, and urban morphologies from the prior work, the recent work is more selective, sparse, judicious about what is and is not included if only to underline what matters. It is not so much an economic imperative, but a value engineering that is intellectually motivated.

Thus, what seems important to me in your question is how any work finds a way to underline what matters with brevity, clarity, and relevance.

It also has to do with maturity.

When you are young, you need to flex your muscles to build an argument, but there also comes a time when you can self-edit to demonstrate a different type of confidence about what is necessary. Some people come to that age much earlier in their architectural career. In my case, because of my own fascination with Mannerism and the Baroque, it led me down paths that were almost always about surplus,

excess, and elaboration—even when their point of departure was a mere detail. The linguistic flourishes that were the rhetorical hallmark of the early work have now given way to a more judicious reduction of that which has most agency. Thus, in this case, the Call to Order also has a deeper biographical reflection.

REK One way to see the dialectic is in a tension and oscillation between type (Rossi) and diagram (Koolhaas). Where do you situate the work of NADAAA between those two poles? [Or perhaps we need a third paradigm to address the work of NADAAA: the organism?]

NT I like the reference to the organism because it does go back to the trajectory I just described between our past and our present. In the earlier phase, I talked about the tell-tale detail, the generative seed of where we began with material units as the building block of larger scale organizations, where one builds an organic relationship between part and whole. Much of that earlier work also reflects the challenges of developing a systemic organization for building construction, not only to develop 'smart' building blocks (how a system turns corners, caps a building, meets the ground, etc.), but also to recognize the exceptions within the very systems one launches.

In the case of Rossi and Koolhaas, there are many other ways to look at the question of type and diagram that flatten the apparent dichotomy: the construction industry as standard, social and cultural conventions, the objet trouvé or the generic object; all of these form a constellation of references between type and diagram that remain relevant for us because they are ready-mades that have a priori cultural significance. Often we will deploy them for pragmatism, as ready-made matter that requires no added emphasis as such, but also matter that is already a language from which to depart. Thus, it is also a foil for those moments of elaboration that make part of what is necessary to emphasize: that which we underline, transform, or invent. And so for me, the type and the diagram, despite their theoretical distinctions, come together in the

way they define a ground zero: a clear foundation from which invention and transformation become distinguished.

REK It is interesting because you underline the similarities as opposed to the tensions.

NT Exactly. I think that despite the necessary differences between type and diagram as conceived by Rossi and Koolhaas, neither are convincingly relevant for the area of emphasis we bring to our work. If anything the type is adopted as raw matter, and the diagram as a morsel of clarity, as parti, and neither are used to authenticate our strategies, per se. It is what happens next that matters: I am interested in that moment where architecture becomes something else, when it is de-familiarized, dismantled, transformed or transported to another state. In the best instances of our own work, there is that moment when the building is no longer that which we readily know.

REK The diagnosis of the emerging sensibility is primarily based on a formal observation; but much like their predecessors in the sixties and seventies who were primarily invested in urban morphology, the new protagonists are basing their project in an urban vision, in ideas for sustainable and livable cities. Do you think the diagram has failed the city? Is type and the intelligence sedimented in it better equipped for the complexity of the city?

NT The idea of type as strong form on its own is not, in and of itself, sophisticated enough to deal with some of the complexities of the emerging city; but also that is not to say that a simple diagram cannot resist the apparent complexities of a city to coalesce in something larger than the sum of the city's parts. In that sense, the clarity of a type may have a radical impact on the transformation of the city.

As you suggest, on its own terms, the idea of type is invested in layers of complexity such that it cannot be reducible to a diagram, but also to a layering of systems—if one deems the material, infrastructural, and organizational breakdown of the building as importantly as one does to its

"gestalt". Even the simplest building is the result of a layered and complex organism.

I suspect that much of what drives the current sensibility and the reappraisal of type is the result of what we have lost as a discipline in engaging the city. That which has been taken over by real estate forces, privatization, community participation, or any other such force that tends to marginalize the disciplinary priorities of architecture, can now be counter-acted by the power of the type: sometimes using the power of strong form as symbol of what architecture can do at the urban scale, but also sometimes as a supple system that engages the complexity of the city around it.

Consider our own Melbourne School of Design project. From a typological perspective it is a simple atrium building, not significantly different from the building it replaced at first glance. However, once one digs deeper, one realizes that the significance of the new building is how it absorbs and engages the context within its doughnut organization. The street that runs through it, the way in which the Joseph Reed façade is redeployed not as icon, but a functioning threshold, and the inside-outside spaces that are activated by programs such as the fablab—all these suggest a transformation of the purity of the type that exceeds its formal autonomy.

At the same time, in an act of resistance to the very context, the invention of the suspended studio within the core of the atrium is not only a reimagination of what studio culture can be today, but the adoption of a powerful iconic strategy that underlines the formal autonomy of the atrium as a public space, not just a benign interior. In this sense, I can see the MSD project as a bridge between that which performs as urban scenography with that which weaves itself into the infrastructure of the city in deliberate and transformative ways.

REK There are two instances where you neatly align with our agenda, if not when surely with the School: It is with regard to the vernacular and to drawing. Since the Office dA days, you have



Interior, Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne, NADAAA & John Wardle Architects, 2014, photograph by Peter Bennetts

been interested in teasing out formal innovation from vernacular building traditions and you have been consistently committed to the drawing as the site of invention in design. The vernacular and the drawing are of immense interest to SoA as you already probably know. At this time we are looking at them not only as anchors for the discipline but as the means for moving discourse and practice forward, very much like they function in your work. Could you please elaborate on this?

NT At the time that I gave the lecture, I was not at Cooper Union. In hindsight, it was a timely question because my own investment in the protocols of representation had a lot to do with my move to Cooper Union, where its curriculum is punctuated by many areas of research in varied media of representation and generation.

The transformative moment of architecture, more often than not, occurs in the act of drawing. I often describe the way in which we drew the Weston House. The line at the top of the corrugated wall was the same length as the line at the bottom of the corrugated wall, which demonstrates that drawing in architecture is not an illustrative process but is already an act of construction. In that instance, that corrugation can produce a ruled surface is its thesis; the vertical ribs offering structural stability to each line connecting top to bottom coordinates, while the horizontal malleability of corrugation offering its

flexibility to undulate at a larger scale. Drawing that elevation was very much our first act of fabrication, with the drawing as proof of its "buildability", which was summarily proven through the very model that was its mock-up.

The other aspect, which is admittedly metaphorical but important, is that drawing always involves acts of projection; and the idea of projection, beyond its agency through geometry, is also about how reality may be transformed, and even challenged, through disciplinary media.

Your question curiously connects drawing through the vernacular, and I wonder if these two are inextricably bound?

In the same way that we adopted typology, we also engaged vernacular building traditions if only to launch our research in material systems. Clapboard siding, running bond brick, butt glazed curtain walls—these are all building system conventions that are widely shared. In our work, they also become the site of transformation and invention. We did not so much represent these materials, but treated the aggregation of lines as construction systems in their own right.

Our first projects were each dedicated to dismantling different construction typologies, one by one: The Mill Road house in terms of vernacular wood construction, Casa la Roca in transforming stacking to variable bonds, the Issam Fares Institute through geometric subdivisions for structural proliferation, etc. We adopted the vernacular not so much as historical matter, but to establish critical building practices through the drawing process, and challenge how construction protocols may transform the ways in which we deploy the means and methods of fabrication.

To this end, it is important to link drawings to construction, where most of our energy has been invested. Not only through digital systems of fabrication, but also in collaborations with the building industry, much of our work

on drawings has been to appropriate the process of generation to short-circuit the shop drawing process, and develop a level of control over design intent to absorb the means and methods as part of the critical part of the design process.

REK **In your role as both a teacher and a practitioner, could you say something about this idea of projection as it relates to drawing by hand versus drawing by computer?**

NT The great thing about Cooper's traditions is that it has never constructed an opposition between drawing by hand and computer. To that end, it never really participated in the paperless studio as Columbia did some years ago; nor has it neglected it in fruitful ways. Visualization and generation are part of a research process that occupies many media concurrently, and is a central part of the pedagogical process.

Our own working process is very sympathetic to this, as we work in non-linear ways. Drawing, modeling, fabricating mock-ups, and toggling between digital and hand based media, we adopt a more strategic use of techniques as they become relevant for the questions we are developing.

I like to think that there are ideas in architecture that are captured by the long durée of history such that they can anticipate the invention of a certain architecture for which we do not yet have the right tools to draw. When we first drew Casa la Roca and the MOMA Fabrications projects, we drew them with pencil even though those projects were completely digital, and parametric, in their conceptualization.

On the other hand, there is the notion that the instrumentality of the means and methods of drawing is really the foundation of what is possible in a certain medium. The idea that you draw a line by hand in a certain way, or that the spline—in a digital capacity—enables a different spatial and architectural speculation. These two phenomena are not necessarily opposing each other, but they demonstrate a

design process that is at once alert of the longer arc of history and disciplinary conventions, while also focused on the agency of contemporary media as a sight of exploration.

Many architectural ideas have a history and a future that is relevant far beyond the immediate technique that is available for their implementation. At the same time, think of those paradigmatic moments where a vision comes to fruition as a direct result of the invention of a technique. Think of the technique of perspective and a project like the Teatro Olimpico, a building that is imbedded in an idea about representation. Our own MOMA fabrications project is, in fact, a response to that very phenomenon, adopting the anamorphic projection not only as representational challenge, but as a test for construction tolerances in the digital age.

REK **From your perspective, do you have any general observations about the group that has been compiled for the Call to Order exhibition and how they might contribute to the contemporary architectural discourse?**

NT There is great variety in the group that you have assembled, and thus trying to unify them may be unnecessarily forced. I am reminded when they curated the Deconstruction show at MoMA, they amassed a great many tendencies, and yet somehow they all had a tangential link to some interpretation of Deconstruction—through philosophy and semiotics, through Constructivism, and through visual tendencies that provoked a more literal 'dismantled' reading of buildings.

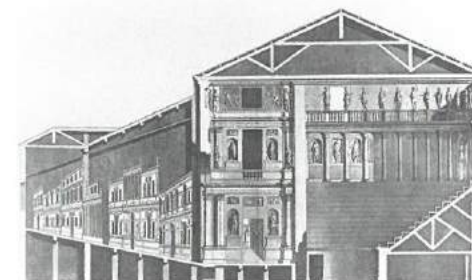
Maybe the more interesting part of your list has to do with how the relationship between forms and ideas play themselves out, between words and images; this tends to be the most polemical aspect of the architectural discipline, as the slippage between the literary and the visual always promises a loose fit, and therein lie many debates. Within that debate, that which matters emerges.

Let me offer an anecdote.

I am sure you followed the ascent of Alejandro Aravena to the Pritzker award; and you have also witnessed the backlash of many critical essays against him claiming that he is riding the train of a social project, in many ways abandoning the project of Architecture. This is ironic for me because this is not a person who has not dabbled into the complexities—and even frivolities—of playful form. Quite the opposite, though he has undertaken a social project of some political complexity, what is striking is actually the range of formal, spatial and material tropes he has deployed in the purest sense of the term. That he has been able to merge the interests of the former and the latter is maybe what distinguishes him, and absolves him of the guilt with which we conventionally target the Formalists.

Somehow, though, Aravena manages to speak in two languages concurrently, taking that which is irreducible to Architecture's agency and translating it into what matters more broadly at a political and cultural level.

What is important to the Call to Order occasion, might be to re-evaluate what matters, and how we may overcome easy polarities to disentangle the conventional oppositions between different forms of debate.



Longitudinal Section, Teatro Olimpico, Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi, 1776