

SOUUPER green!

souped up green architecture

edited by

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Souper Useless

Marc Neveu

Jean-François Lyotard's 1979 text, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, described an age of "hurried empiricism" in which we no longer ask if knowledge is true, but rather of "what use is it?" In a more recent essay, the architectural critic and professor David Leatherbarrow echoes this evaluation in architectural practice and theory, when he describes what he sees as a shift "from what the building is to what it does."¹ The current proliferation of performance-themed conferences, symposia, and publications certainly document this change. This move is also evidenced in the quantification (and related granting of awards) of the projected energy consumption of built work. Often, the increased performance of a building is also related to an interest in marketability for the firm developing the work. Concomitant to this turn in architectural epistemology and production is a shift in the expectations of the studio. The research-based studio has recently re-emerged and with it a renewed fascination with fabrication, bio-mimicry, information-based design, and all things parametric often under the guise of performance. At best, perhaps, is a new awareness achieved by grafting the techniques of the natural sciences onto architectural production in the hope of providing a new "utilitas," by way of material efficiencies, form-making, fabrication techniques, responses to ecological (and other) crises, and, even, a renewed sense of the discipline of architecture.

Despite these noble intentions most architectural studios still, however, produce work that is not indeed critiqued or even informed by its actual and measurable performance. One issue is, of course, time. Post-occupancy studies of performance, rare enough in built work, are simply not possible given the structure of an academic term. Another issue is scale. If built, work is either a singular prototype, a scaled version of a larger vision, or at the scale of a small housing unit. There are exceptions. The work at the Media Lab at MIT, the popular U.S. Department of Energy's Solar Decathlon, and others do produce built work that is indeed performative, but ironically often uninhabited. More often than not, a studio produces artifacts that are inherently useless beyond the immediate academic environment but still does so under the guise of performance. What if the work produced in studio was

1. David Leatherbarrow, "Unscripted Performances," in *Architecture Oriented Otherwise* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 43.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
3. *Ibid.*, 60. Nietzsche is arguing for the study of the classics.

4. *Ibid.*, 71.
5. *Ibid.*, 75.

recognized and understood for its uselessness? What might be the use of that? Further, rather than studio attempting to mimic a normative architectural practice, what if an architectural practice attempted to mimic the uselessness of studio? In this short essay, I would like to propose that a model for architectural agency could be that of uselessness.

Use

In Nietzsche's seminal essay, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," he describes three approaches to history with both positive and negative affects.² The title of the collection of essays refers to each as "untimely" as they act "counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come."³ Nietzsche begins the essay by comparing ourselves to cows in the field. Cows, he argues, are happy because they have no memory. We, however, are burdened by the weight of history. We cannot escape it. It is clear from recent decisions by NAAB and other well-intentioned accrediting bodies, architecture school is far from any risk of being burdened by history. Studio, however, and all of the student performance criteria covered therein is certainly entrenched in our curricula. I am not aware of a professional school of architecture, for example, that does not have studio as the focus as evidenced by both the units earned and hours spent. Can the uses and advantages of history outlined by Nietzsche be used to more clearly define the use of studio?

The first approach to history was termed by Nietzsche as Monumental. He uses the metaphor of a mountain range. The peaks of the mountains are akin to the great acts of history. The use of such an approach to history is positive in that we are reminded that, as a culture, we might again be great. Taken solely as the acts of singular men, however, the context, richness, and depth of those acts are lost. As Nietzsche states clearly:

Monumental history deceives by analogies: with seductive similarities it inspires the courageous to foolhardiness and the inspired to fanaticism: and when we go on to think of this kind of history in the hands and heads of gifted egoists and visionary scoundrels, when we see empires

destroyed, princes murdered, wars and revolutions launched and the number of historical 'effects in themselves,' that is to say, effects without sufficient cause, again augmented.⁴

The architecture studio similarly benefits from a clear, even heroic, vision. The potential for students to develop their own interests can certainly be of great value. The organization of a typical studio—fifteen students working on a similar building with one professor—supports this sort of monumental approach from a structural as well as a thematic perspective. There are, however, hazards. The practice of developing fifteen individual projects roughly to the level of schematic design and lasting one academic term seems limited if not outdated. Not only does this approach further perpetuate the myth of the genius-architect, the singular focus on an individual's project does not prepare students to work in an office environment in which an individual is almost always part of a much larger team. This is ironic in that this structure of studio is often rationalized as being modeled on the process of normative practice. Further, it is not clear what is gained by a studio in which the rationale, rhetoric, representation, and even aesthetic of the students' work is driven solely by the interests of the professor. While the student work may be valuable in that it works within a well-defined position or mode of representation, that position often lacks the depth and richness of the original source (the professor's).

The second model of history according to Nietzsche is the Antiquarian and he explains this approach with a metaphor of a tree. The antiquarian historian focuses so much on the roots of the tree that they fail to recognize that the tree has limbs and bears fruit. Nietzsche lauds the intense focus and careful study but he condemns history for history's sake. As he clearly states, "Antiquarian history itself degenerates from the moment it is no longer animated and inspired by the fresh life of the present."⁵ While the fascination with the minutiae of history is more of an issue in graduate programs, his critique also bears light on the current fascination in architecture schools with all things performative. Of course, architecture is inherently technological and a strict focus on the technical may produce work that is indeed performative. But how, in the

6. See Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, trans. Giorgio Verrecchia (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).
7. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 75.

studio environment, is this performance tested? Often, much of this work has the look of technical expertise, but in reality very little is known of the actual performance of the work. In studio, the extreme focus on building systems, often represented as exploded axonometrics of façade systems, reduces the inherent complexity of the experience of architecture to material assemblage often argued as “professional,” (as opposed to theoretical) or, even worse, as “comprehensive.”

Nietzsche names the third mode of history as the Critical and it is this approach to history that is in the service of life. A critical history is one that recognizes any use of history is for the present. This is not, in the terms of Tafuri, operative.⁶ It is, rather, one that knows of history in the fullest sense, but is able to overcome it. Nietzsche claims that, “if he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it, and finally condemning it.”⁷ As stated earlier in this essay, the studio is not an analog to practice; the work presented at reviews is not a precursor to built form; there is no budget; the professor is not the client, or subcontractor; and, the site is often much more negotiable in a studio than in the professional world. If one takes away all of these tropes, what is the use of studio? Can this model of studio finally be condemned? I will, again, posit that architecture studio in these terms is useless but there is an inherent advantage to this uselessness. Recognizing the value of the artifacts produced rather than assuming such artifacts to be signifiers of some sort of future construction, for example, radically shifts the way in which work is produced as well as assessed. It is typical for studio critics to discuss “the building” when there is never going to be a building, only representations of a building. What if a project was not intended to be anything other than the artifacts produced—drawings, models, writings—not “of” a future oriented production, but valuable in and of themselves?

Representation

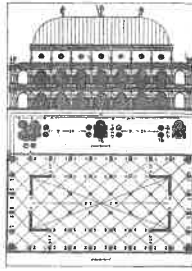
As we know, architects do not make buildings; they make representations of, and instructions for, the making of buildings. In our somewhat litigious professional world, the ideal model

for the translation between drawing and building is that of transcription where the drawing is precisely congruent to the built artifact. Similar to Morse code, in which a system of sounds literally stand in for letters to form words, the contract document is intended to directly relay the proposed building. The system of representation, as in Morse code, is not affected by the intention of the building—objectivity, in fact, is the goal and purpose. Differences between drawing and building do, however, exist. Issues of fabrication, installation timing and technique, material behaviors and tolerances, as well as the relative abilities of contractors, make the direct correlation between drawing and building impossible. Interpretation, it seems, is always required.

Historically, this translation was seen as necessary, and even celebrated. Filarete (Antonio Averlino) speaks about this in his 15th century treatise, *Libro d'architettura*. He suggests that from conception to realization, a building will change. Further, there is a potentially enriching process involved in turning the drawing into a physical structure. He used the analogy of the architect as both mother and midwife. A building, according to Filarete, gestates for seven to nine months during which time the architect dreams about the building. Finally the project emerges as a drawing or model that then must be reared through construction and finally inhabitation. In this regard, the drawing is not a one-to-one notation of the intended reality. The drawing was never, and could never be, the work itself. The drawing, rather, was more similar to a musical score, open to multiple performances.

A few centuries later, the relationship between drawing and building was still not direct. Palladio's drawings, famously, do not match the built work. This was by no means a mistake of construction. It was rather that, for Palladio, the status of the drawings conveyed the intention of the work and not simply instructions for making. One example, of many, is the Basilica in Vicenza. Palladio first translates the plan of a Roman Basilica into a town hall for Vicenza. The drawings show his intention of symmetric and properly proportioned rooms. The proportioning relates back to the model of the basilica as well as a cosmological ideal and thus guaranteed meaning. The reality

right: *Basilica Palladiana, Vicenza*
 (Andrea Palladio, 1549-1617)
 far right: *Le Carceri d'invenzione, Plate XIV:*
The Gothic Arch
 (Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1761)



of the built work, however, could not be further from the truth. The existing plan of market stalls, not renovated by Palladio, does not come close to the purity of his proposed plan as seen in the *Quattro Libri* (1570).

The status of drawings, as informing but not directly determining a future project that relies upon an act of translation from the craftsman, remained in many parts of the world, even into the previous century. Indeed, in matters concerning the actual making of a building, the craftsmen were still intuitively "right" and did not rely upon drawings to build. This relationship opens up the space that architectural representation may be something more, or at least other, than instructions for building. Giambattista Piranesi, the 18th century Venetian architect, certainly understood this when he proposed the *Carceri* etchings. In both versions, we see representations that do not have the expectation of a built project. This was by no means unintentional. Piranesi had spent much of his early career documenting the buildings of Rome. He was clearly obsessed with building. That said, producing built work was not his interest. In the introduction to his *Prima Parte* (1743), Piranesi, ranting to one of his early patrons Nicola Giobbe, explains his position quite clearly.

These speaking ruins have filled my spirit with images that accurate drawings, even those such as the immortal Palladio, could never have succeeded in conveying, though I always kept them before my eyes. Therefore having the idea of presenting to the world some of these images, but not hoping for an architect of these times who could effectively execute some of them—whether for fault of architecture itself, fallen from the highest perfection to which it had risen in the period of the greatest splendor of the Roman Republic and in the times of the all powerful emperors who succeeded it; or whether the fault of those who should have been patrons of this most noble art. The fact is that we have not seen buildings equaling the cost of a Forum Nerva, of an amphitheater of Vespian, or of a Palace of Nero; therefore, there seems to be no recourse than for me or some other modern architect to explain his ideas through his drawings, and so to take away from sculpture and painting the advantage, as the great Juvarrá

has said, they now have over architecture, and similarly to take it (architecture) away from the abuse of those with money, who make us believe that they themselves are able to control the execution of architecture.

Many examples exist over the past 200 plus years since Piranesi etched architecture; the hallucinogenic imaginings of Lequeu and Boullée; Gandy's dystopias; the formalisms of the Russian Constructivists; Theo van Doesburg's painterly expressions of plastic space; the comic book capers of Archigram; even Mies van der Rohe, that paragon of professionalism, produced many collages that expressed more intention than information. More recently, Tschumi's produced transcripts for Manhattan; Libeskind translated his inner Piranesi in his *Micromegas*; just as Douglas Darden revived a long dead Lequeu in his ten acts of *Condemned Building*. Each of these representations still needs to be interpreted, but the mode of translation is not metonymical, between drawing and building. In many of the examples above, architectural performance—be it structural, formal, environmental, even political—is not ignored. Piranesi clearly understood the nature of stone, wood, and rope, just as he undermined the "rules" of perspective developed years earlier by the brothers Bibiena. The difference in the examples listed above is that the images constructed are not beholden to a future construction. The use value—be it projective, discursive, political, or other—is demonstrated by the representations themselves. This mode of architectural production, ironically, is more akin to the reality of what is produced in the studio environment. Many of these examples, however, do not turn away from issues of building but rather use technology in a much more nuanced manner.

Technology

In the well-known essay from 1954, "The Question Concerning Technology," Martin Heidegger outlined a critique of technology. He argued that our technological world-view framed the way in which we understood our world. In this way, nature became a "standing reserve," awaiting consumption. Discussions around oil and gas prices, the production and consumption of food in North America, and even the way in which we discuss water clearly validates Heidegger's thesis. For Heidegger, this sort of

reductionist thinking was not able to reveal a truth, previously known through *poiesis*. More recently, David Leatherbarrow extended Heidegger's critique into architectural discourse. Leatherbarrow argues that, "Continued dedication to a technical interpretation of performance will lead to nothing more than an uncritical reaffirmation of old-style functionalist thinking—a kind of thinking that is both reductive and inadequate because it recognizes only what it can predict."⁸ For Heidegger, and perhaps Leatherbarrow, this Gordian knot could not be undone by way of a nostalgic return to an unrecoverable past. Rather, it was through technology that one might recover, and indeed reveal, meaning. Heidegger looked to the term *techné* as the root of technology to reconsider how we might overcome our technological world-view.

In Homer *techné*, particularly metal-smithing, carpentry, and weaving, was the know-how of the demiurge. It was not differentiated from the act of magic, which, like Prometheus, taps into the power of the gods. Controlling, often dangerously, the order of the world, the demiurge had the ability to create wondrous objects and magical effects. The word *daidala* appears as a complement of the verbs to make, to manufacture, to forge, to weave, and to see. It refers to objects such as gold, helmets, and other defensive weapons of Homeric warriors, as well as furniture and ships. It is also used in the context of words denoting light, luminosity, and brilliance. *Daidala* in Homer possess mysterious powers, capable of creating dangerous illusions through the evocation of deception and fear, but also of admiration. The invention of *daidala* depends upon a form of intelligence known as *metis*, understood as cleverness in overcoming disorder. Daedalus was the figure of the pre-classical architect who was endowed with *metis* and whose namesake was used to describe these objects of wonder. Be it the *agalмата*—statues whose limbs and eyes appeared to be moveable—or the cloak that Pasiphae wore to seduce and copulate with a bull, and even the labyrinth to contain the Minotaur produced from that metaphoric union, Daedalus produced objects of wonder. His *techné*, or skill, was not informed by economy or as a means to an end, but by imagination, the magical, and the fantastic.

The quick version presented above of the long history of "paper" architecture includes many such objects of wonder. Piranesi's *Carceri* have captivated (and befuddled) architects and historians since the eighteenth century; Ledoux's elevation of the cemetery at Chaux still makes one pause to consider the intended meaning of "elevation;" the evocation of night and day in Boullée's Cenotaph to Newton is wondrously magical. There is certainly use value in the *daidala*, but not in the model of professional activity or of the natural sciences. Rather, it is in the ability to invoke wonder through a critique of normative practice. This is exactly the potential that exists within all architecture studios and that can be used as a model for architectural agency. This is, I would argue, a similar strategy to the work in this collection, referred to in the title as "souper." This term implies at least two meanings; the first is one of value, the other is one of modifying by bringing together various parts (as in a soup)—often with cars and in the Southern California context. Just as cars were being reconfigured to perform in various ways, so too is the refiguring of architecture being employed to rethink the technologically driven and resource-based approaches to ecology. In this context, the architect might do so through technology itself, directly implicating our own presence within technology. This may allow for recognition, perhaps even a renewed awareness, which will lead to the reframing of the questions we ask around the issue of sustainability. The work of the architect then may not be a prelude to, or representation of, built form. Rather, the work is related to discourse, but is not referential; rhetorical, but not informational; technical, but not necessarily practical; and finally, performative, but not necessarily productive. This, then, may be souper useless.

