visible chaos

One can stand at the center of any American downtown and see many excellent buildings from before World War II and find hardly any bad ones – yet from that same vantage, one can find any number of horrible post-World War II buildings and probably not find a single good one. This is typically the result of the current dogma that originality trumps all other elements of the design task, meaning that buildings have to be reinvented constantly, usually at the expense of age-old typological conventions. Contemporary architectural consensus is that heroic haute avant-garde modernism is the salvation for cultural mediocrity. Ultimately what has been achieved is the inheritance of terminally defective buildings built for a brief celebratory presence and then sentencing their occupants to the abidingly dysfunctional "out years".

Most citizens and public officials loathe the city halls, post offices, and schools built in the last 75 years: baleful concrete brutalist bunkers, the off-the-shelf engineered boxes of generica, the cheapjack corporate architrash; but they lack the conviction to say so, since it is seen as tantamount to opposing progress. The result is surrendering to either the economic existences of the developers or the intellectual games of the architects.

Just as religious fundamentalism declares salvation for the simplistically passionate, wayward haute avant-garde modernism promotes a rulebook that is written by the players. Much of what is being lauded as the future of architecture promotes the desperately inadequate vision of occupied sculpture that is often budgetary wasteful, aesthetically self-serving, openly contemptuous of cultural values, self-referential with a total disregard for the immediate context and avoid at all cause, anything ever seen before that could be labeled 'conventional'.

In the haute avant-garde modernist rulebook, obscurity has come to equal meaning. Like insider baseball linguistics of economics or philosophy, 'archispeak' speaks only to other architects and those who drank the Kool-Aid. It's an incomprehensible language developed to avoid the criticism of the general public by dazzling them with nonsense.

What has been inherited from the haute avant-garde modernism is fashion designer esthetics of two-dimensional meaning involving ever more dramatic exploitation of photographic visualization with an acumen no deeper than the bubble diagrams used to initiate the building's layout. Architectural teachings simply allude to intent, rather than deal with content. They teach sculpture versus building. A building built with these haute arts sensibilities to the exclusion of its weatherability, affordability or usefulness has a short list of design criteria. Like a one-liner or sound bite they have an instantaneous delivery-to-judgment sequence. Haute avant-garde architecture lives in its own world, where success is self-determined.

Today's architecture is a reflection of the age of haute modernist dogma, shoddy construction, aesthetic pluralism, public cynicism, hyper electronic communication, heterogeneous social mores, and economies dependent on replacement rather than stewardship. While the media beams out waves of contrived imagery, the cultural collectivity emits very weak and often opposing signals. In a social vacuum, the hyperactive organs of the information age generate an ambiance long on stimulation yet short of substance. Fragmented and ghettoized, society lacks any sort of consensus or sense of cohesion. When society is a blur seen through heavy static, architecture stutters. It might be more appropriate to amend the old maxim to "architecture is chaos made visible".

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