

Architecture's Optimism from the Critical Through the Cruel to the Strange

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Optimism has profoundly shaped architecture's engagement with and organization of the world. Oscillating from the Critical (modern volume) through the Cruel (postmodern communication), Strange Optimism offers the discipline both complexity and corroboration. However, optimism is a contentious term associated with modern concepts of hope, utopia, and instrumentality. This essay posits formats of architectural optimism during modernism and postmodernism, as well as develops a theory of optimism using theories of strangeness.

"If you're not an optimist, you shouldn't be in architecture."¹
—Daniel Libeskind

Libeskind's proclamation could be understood as either a definition of architecture's inherent attitude towards creative activity or a naive call to arms regarding society. Regardless, the place of optimism in the discipline of architecture has affected far more than attitudes of practitioners. By tracing a genealogy of architectural optimism from the Critical (modern volumes) through the Cruel (postmodern communication), the Strange offers the discipline both complexity and corroboration (customizeable contemporary). Although different in scale and implementation throughout history, the optimistic entanglement with the audience of architecture is underlined by participatory models that give up traditional control of the discipline's aesthetic and technical effects that caught stride during modernism's more egalitarian engagement with the world. By ceding certain disciplinary controls, architects found new forms of disciplinaryity in creating terms of optimistic engagement with architecture.

Optimism is a contentious term at best, sometimes associated with concepts like hope, utopia and instrumentality. First, a key cultural difference between optimism and hope is that hope deals in particular goals/outcomes tied to a situation, while optimism is a form of proactive engagement with the future.² Second, the history of the term utopia is more closely related to the idealism of a "future without a past," which differs from the real-time agency optimism offers.³ In regards to both hope and utopia, Aldo Rossi's critique of naive functionalism locates the problem of idealism in the concept of function during Modernism, as a stand in or replacement to the structure and formation of architecture as

a cultural, temporal and social element with a past and potentially negotiable future.⁴ It follows that architectural instrumentality is precisely the interface between discipline and culture that must be engaged when delineating a genealogy of optimism because of its ability to provide both agency to a public, as well as control of architectural effect.

This essay will (1) define optimism(s) architecturally and philosophically within modernism and postmodernism; and (b) develop a theory of optimism for contemporary architecture through examining existing or soon to be realized architectural projects and their relationship to Strangeness. In a more specific sense, this essay will look at scales of public engagement with buildings - from tactical urbanism to public interior - and their relationship to formal, aesthetic and technical effects suggesting how architecture's future is, was and will be tied into defining terms of qualified participation with an audience.

THE CRITICAL OPTIMISM OF MODERNIST VOLUMES

Modernism and functionalism seem more intertwined and interchangeable than they should. American Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey's concept of meliorism is one form of optimism that helps qualify functionalism as an attitude of modernism. Dewey states that "meliorism is the belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or good, in any event may be bettered."⁵ When applied to architectural mantras like Louis Sullivan's Form follows Function, this format of optimism is better understood as a dimension of architecture to operate through. In this way, a Critical Optimism is an attitude attributed to how modern architects developed new ways for architecture to be instrumental by focusing on ideal scales of function and space.

Modernism was almost always seen as "intrinsically involving new techniques, mass culture and a broader social role."⁶ The problem of the mass and the broad underlies the audience and public that modernism supposedly engaged - anonymous and vast. Buckminster Fuller's work often was organized around this universal scale. We know now that the scope of popular modernism led to Westernized cultural views becoming the norm of mass architectural applications. In other words, Spaceship Earth could be seen as an excuse to include all in non-inclusive ways through lack of representation. Moreover, this solidifies Critical Optimism as both a rallying call for the modern and an excuse if this form of instrumentality fails e.g. good intention, misguided application.

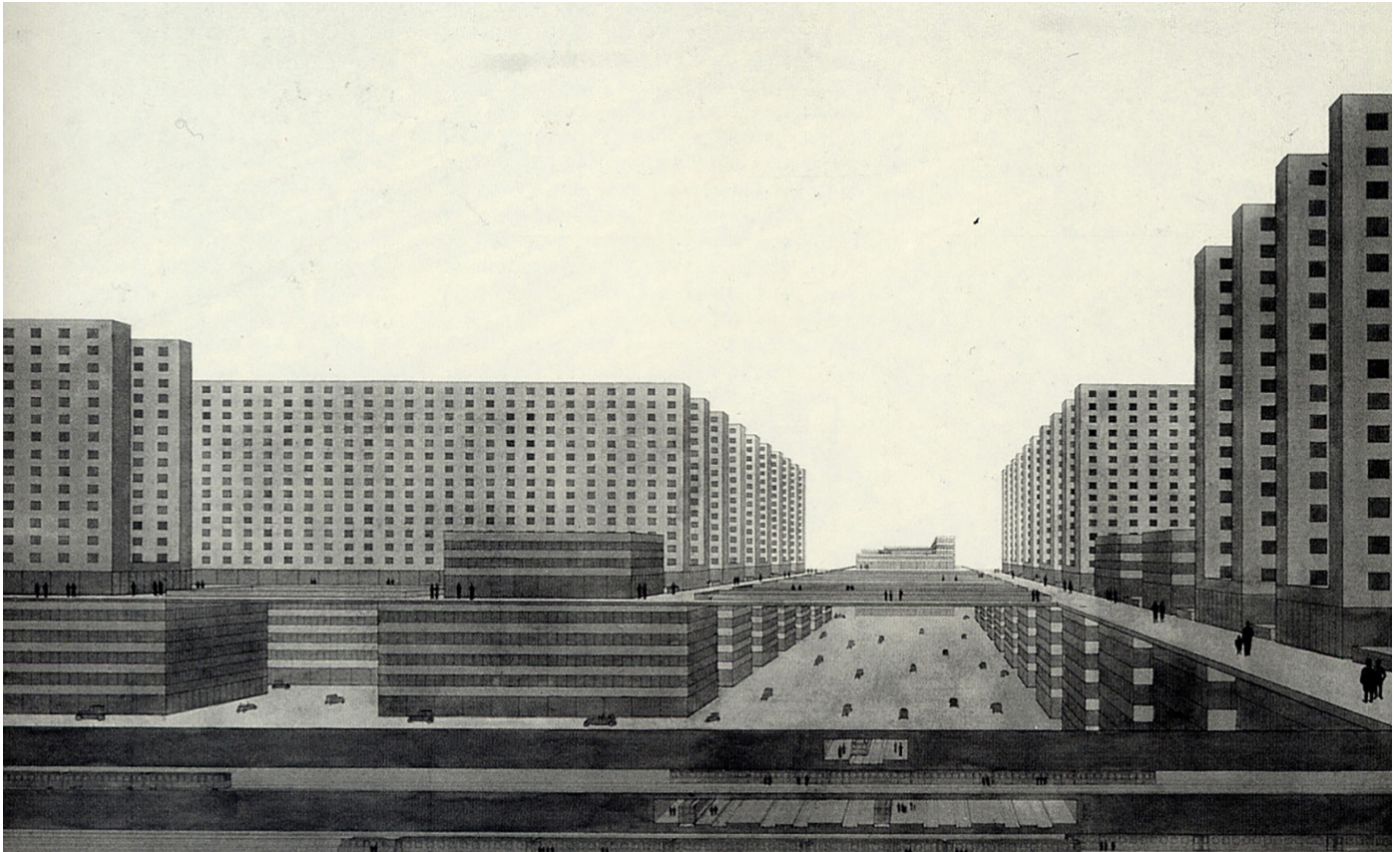


Figure 1: Infamous for its 'relentlessness', Ludwig Hilberseimer's Hochhausstadt can also be repositioned as volumetric positivism inherent in Critical Optimism. Hochhausstadt illustration, Ludwig Hilberseimer (1924).

Couple notions of functionalism with the universal scales of modernism and what results is an ideally sized volume - space - for architecture. Sigfried Gideon suggests that "...we have become sensitive to the space-emanaing powers of volumes, this awakening an emotional affinity with the earliest origins of architecture....we again realize that volume affects space just as an enclosure to an interior..."⁷ One way to reimagine this definition is to see the value that volume presents modernism as an addendum to function enabling a particular spatial instrumentality expressed through architectural objects - buildings, cities and spaces.

However, Critical Optimism within modern projects such as the Corbusian Free-Standing Housing Block, Ludwig Hilberseimer's Hochhausstadt and Oscar Niemeyer's Plan for Brasilia differ greatly in application. Architectural critic Jack Self suggests that, "Le Corbusier still differentiated architectural typologies (housing, office, culture) and allotted each their own role within the hierarchy of the city, (while) Hilberseimer conflated everything."⁸ Perhaps nearer to Corbu's understanding, Oscar Niemeyer's Plan of Brasilia organizes a spatial and plastic cityscape that defines the boundaries of a citizenry's interaction with function through its relationship with large volumes and big spaces. In effect, this approach flattened participatory elements of modernism to erase the peculiarities of human-sized objects with architecture. Even as the death knells of style and ideology crept into the discipline, late-modern architecture continued to engage in a Critical Optimism by

"exaggerating modernism to keep it alive" - object's scale had more to do with style than other popular architectural dimensions of expression.⁹ Volumes could engage universal sized issues, but not create effective vehicles for human-sized participation.

THE CRUEL OPTIMISM OF POSTMODERNIST COMMUNICATION

Optimism in Postmodernism is a complicated attitude to locate because of an oeuvre that is monolithic and ironic, yet heterotopic in its freedom from modern dogma. Cultural critic and philosopher Lauren Blant's theory of Cruel Optimism suggests that 'when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing,' a cycle of cruelty impedes the process.¹⁰ Blant's Cruel is closely tied into the ways in which capitalism creates "fantasies of the good life, when the ordinary becomes a landfill for an overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation, whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to have a life that adjustment seems like accomplishment."¹¹ Reframing Postmodernism as simply an adjustment to architectural history is reductive at best. But looking at the scales of disciplinary adjustment during Postmodernism helps identify the move away from functional objects towards the more visually engaged and socially entrenched sign and metaphor, as an issue of instrumentality. In this way, Cruel Optimism reframes postmodern architectural agency as somewhere between the symbolic and the public, resulting in a opaque relationship between them, where architects reduce critical optimism's scale to become relatively incremental and abundantly visual.

In Complexity and Contradiction, Robert Venturi championed richness over clarity.¹² As an indictment on the clarity of Critical Optimism,

richness becomes a compositional figure-oriented facade expression of language that centers predominantly on the relationship architecture has had with people historically. This obsession with sign, signifier, symbol and metaphor would be updated by Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in their declaration that billboards are all almost right or their definition of a new form of visual interaction the public has with commercial typologies.¹³ This reintroduction of the vernacular into discourses on architecture came from other directions as well, such as Rudofsky's Architecture without Architects that focused on non-pedigreed architecture that did not commemorate power and wealth.¹⁴ The result was vernaculars and language becoming a Cruelly Optimistic obstacle for developing productive instrumentalities during postmodernism.

The applications of Cruel Optimism differ within iconic postmodernist projects like Michael Graves' Portland Building or Venturi Scott Brown's proposal for the Football Hall of Fame. The aesthetic surface-oriented composition of classical symbols and architectural tropes of the Portland Building creates a visible language of civiness for a public to identify with. But what if that public is neither classical or civic? Venturi Scott Brown's proposal for the National Football Hall of Fame is an example of technological signage and diagrammatic symbol portraying a real time proto-screen showing visitors the X's and O's of a live football game. In both cases, the relationship between patron and metaphor are clear, however out of touch or hyper-specific they may be in their form of communication. This is echoed in Jeff Kipnis' critique of Foreign Office Architects use of metaphor in their design communication of Yokohoma Port Terminal where he suggests that communication with a client or public vis-a-vis representation might better serve the discipline if it failed as communique but succeeded in theorizing new forms of client or public.¹⁵

THE STRANGE OPTIMISM OF A CUSTOMIZEABLE CONTEMPORARY

According to Jacques Ranciere the Strange within cultures of art and aesthetics "...aims to produce a new perception of the world...[and] create a commitment to its transformation."¹⁶ Ranciere's work covers many versions of the place Strangeness occupies in social transformation. By challenging aesthetic and technical norms of a given context, the Strange makes a public aware that (a) it is different; (b) it is purposeful and (c) they are a part of it. Yet another possibility is for the Strange to seem Familiar or what David Leatherbarrow would call Remote Immediacy - the act of being near by being far.¹⁷ In this case, the Strange bridges the distance between the discipline's effects and the public's engagement. Strange Optimism is a key tactic for architectural instrumentality creating an important cultural possibility: the chance for new architectural objects to quickly become acceptable and familiar alongside intersectional forms of society - complexity and corroboration.

Participation has become a fundamental tool in defining architecture's relationship with people. Congruently, the move away from mass production towards the ever-present mass customization has changed the production of architecture, but perhaps not the reception. While mass customization fast-forwards how architecture is made - 3D printing and digital fabrication - participation still occupies a more traditional territory that is either functional or symbolic - critical and cruel. However, that is not always the case and a burgeoning group of young architects such as Andres Jaque/Office for Political Innovation, Assemble and Office Andorus are pushing a Strangely Optimistic agenda to redefine architectural instrumentality.

In Ikea Disobedients, a now almost canonical project, New York/Madrid based Andres Jaque and his Office for Political Innovation set

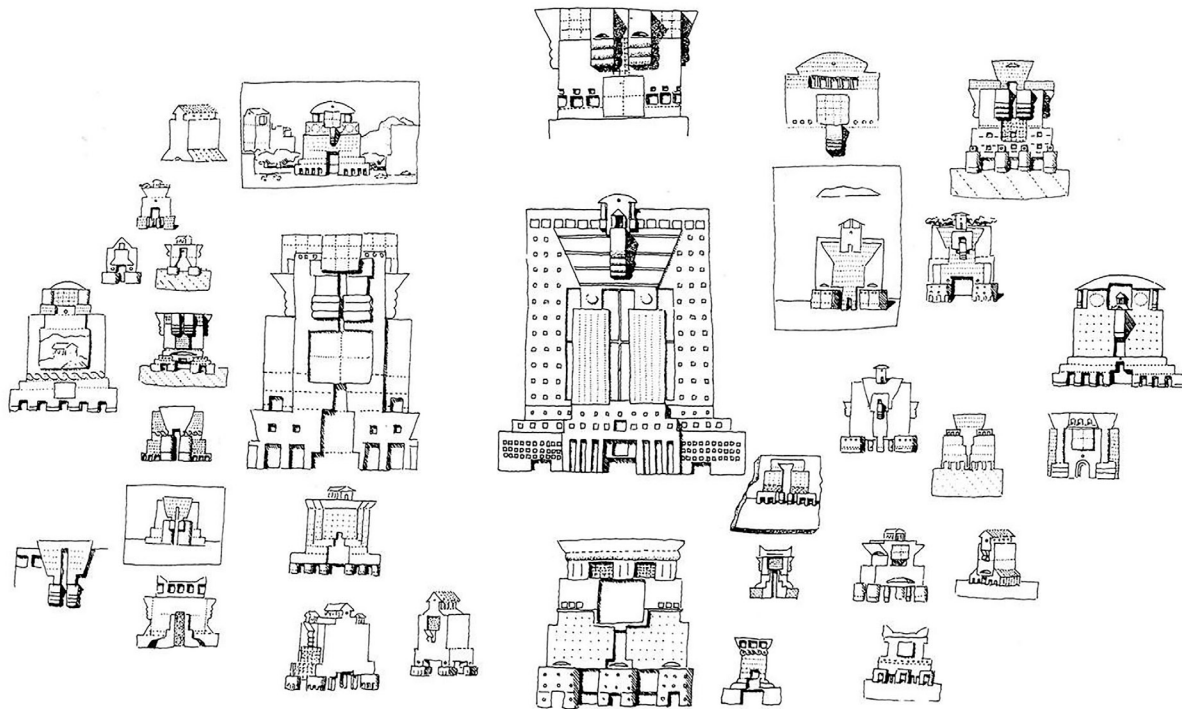


Figure 2: Portland Building Facade Studies. Michael Graves & Associates (1979)

the parameters of an evolving IKEA™ furniturescape that framed and enabled an architectural performance through the lives of participants. Jaque states that,

“For several years now I have thought about urbanism and the city, not so much from the perspective of stable manifestations of the urban, but rather through a detailed description of the chains of relationships within which the qualities we relate to the urban manifest themselves. I focus particularly on the way in which domestic interiors are interconnected to create social fabrics within which diversity, politics, activism, comfort and collective wellbeing activities take place and are managed, and turn (those ideas) on their heads.”¹⁸

At once, the project is both part and whole through its development as a performance and its technical reality as a mass produced and expertly hacked piece of lifestyle motivated furniture. By manifesting research regarding the inability for contemporary people’s domestic reality to fit within familiar patterns, Ikea Disobedients is also equal parts protestant and projective - critical of conventional limits and optimistic about people’s ability to push through them.

Jaque locates instrumentality of Ikea Disobedients, as the expressive space between furniture and instruction. By ‘systematically’ not

following directions, the participants of the performance were able to craft idiosyncratic, highly defined and strange designs that were reflective of IKEA™ design identity, particular personal moments and lifestyle choices. Perhaps more incredibly, the stories of the research subjects in Ikea Disobedients almost always engage a diverse and underserved population providing them agency through participation and representation within the assemblage of contemporary domestic patterns.

London design collective Assemble is riding a wave of popularity that seems to be at least in part related to their strange take on practice and projects as non-hierarchical whilst providing incredible control to users and clients. Folly for a Flyover, a temporary space of performance and play located in Hackney Wick, UK engages the issue of a kit of parts and the use of unskilled laborers in the projective construction of public space - involving the public in the process and progress of architecture’s development. In addition to that scale of instrumentality, Assemble uses narrative as both a nod to Postmodernist communication, but also as an excuse to create their formats of participation.

Assemble’s creative multi-programming in Folly for a Flyover allowed an almost 24-hr use of the space from early morning Cafe to a cinema and theatre that engaged city-wide institutions such as Create Festival and



Figure 3: Ikea Disobedients, Andres Jaque/Office for Political Innovation (2012).



Figure 4: Folly for a Flyover, Assemble Studio (2011).

the Barbican Arts Centre. Without batting an eye, the issues of sustainable building practice is addressed in their design of walls for Folly, which at the “at the end of the summer, were unstrung and used to make new play and planting facilities for a local primary school.” This currency of architecture as both hyper-participatory and institutionally diverse helped persuade the London Legacy Development Corporation to invest in permanent infrastructure which has allowed the site to continue as a public space.¹⁹ In a time where architecture and permanence are being negotiated, Assemble has found a place for their approach to architecture - collective and participatory - that mortgaged its constructability to create an instrumental public in its value as an urban scale intervention that should exist as long-term architecture.

In Safe Shape, Portland based design collaborative Office ANDORUS, creates a travelling Drug-Consumption Room exhibit that challenges acceptability and legality while attempting to influence public perception of opiate use and government policies around it. By engaging perhaps one of the most underserved populations for architecture - addicts - Safe Shape removes antiquated notions of ideal users for idiosyncratic architectural spaces that reflect and accept the human condition unconditionally. Within a pop-up political space, Safe Shape’s scale of instrumentality is located at the intersection of activist communities, public education and projective authorship.

Safe Shape is more a developable tool than pure installation. Its programming is idiosyncratic because activists running it tailor their Harm Reduction approach and message to their location and audience. This truncated pyramid is constructed through fabric tension, meaning it is

self-supporting and strong, yet light and soft that comes with its own instructions. The design, a 10’x10’x10’ volume with two skins for indoor and outdoor events, collapses into four check-in bags. This creates both a localized and broad collective space where an architectural object mediates an essential public health discussion in the United States, creates security through its iconicity, yet is malleable as an educational space. Safe Shape is a social pressure release valve that is both big in intention and small in application, suggesting that architecture does not have to act historically to be disciplined. This aluminum framed and fabric draped building challenges conservative ideas of what healthcare spaces might be while at the same time provide a new species of urban architecture that aspires to empower people through beauty, education and compassion.

These projects represent typologies of Strange Optimism that permeate many projects today. Among them, the most visible are: *Participatory Construction*, *Effectual Controls*, and *Constructive Representation*. Models of *Participatory Construction* are happenstance, from projects like the Rural Studio to Assemble’s horizontal authorship where users of architecture become complicit in its realization. The allocation of *Effectual Controls* create objects in a project - disciplinary effects and elements like facades, atmospheres, lighting, walls, etc. - that a public gets to control without resorting to paternal postures of enveloping or volumizing bodies in space, like modernism attempted. Finally, *Constructive Representation* is an architectural object that provides representation or constructs identities of intersectional groups and/or social causes without purely creating a symbolic representation of them, like postmodernism attempted. In this way, Strange Optimism is not only an aesthetic response to a social dimension of architecture via



Figure 5: Safe Shape in Downtown Seattle during Drug Policy Awareness week, Office Andorus (2016)

instrumentality, but also a space for contemporary cultures to develop alongside equally strange architectural objects.

THE NEED FOR THE STRANGE

Of all the Optimisms architecture has engaged, the Cruel still dictates the efficacy of instrumentality today. In Laboria Cuboniks recently canonical Xenofeminist Manifesto, the collective discusses specific problems at hand for valuable engagement with the contemporary in late-capitalism, stating that, “Valuable platforms for connection, organization, and skill-sharing become clogged with obstacles to productive debate positioned as if they are debate.”²⁰ Of course, this extends to neoliberal projects of sustainability and social practice, amongst others; and whilst this mistaking of obstacle as production engenders a massive amount of popular or populist projects, it does not add any new disciplinary value back into the debate. Congruently, theories surrounding the Post-Contemporary are apt here if only because their definitions seem to describe a meta-production of architecture: the future happens before the present, time arrives from the future.²¹ Architecture has always been occupied with creating the future before the present and ipso facto time.

In application, these three projects represent a shift in scale and interaction with the creation of future, at points tactically urban and interior at others. In a much more specific sense, they enact a Strange Optimism in their awareness of architecture’s design of/with

the public and their disavowment to reiterate Critical or Cruel version of it. Strange Optimism is a customizable contemporary, attuned to emergence of a particular public and localized to produce a new form of architectural disciplinarity through intersectional universalism. Instead of simply staking space for engagement, the terms are malleable and the controls are plentiful - from technology to programming to narrative to construction to aesthetics. Architecture has never have been so exposed and yet it proves to be a resilient discipline that reaffirms its place in the mediation of the world’s objects.

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