Positive Disturbances: Urban Form Strategies in Eisenman's University Art Museum

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Abstract

This paper addresses architectural composition, interrogating its capacity in open space, circulation, and built form to make manifest diverse time and scale complexities. It does this through an analysis of Peter Eisenman's unbuilt project for the University Art Museum, Long Beach (1986-1988). The paper is founded on two propositions. The first is that Eisenman's project provides an alternative approach to thinking architecture's relation to urban scale form and the city more generally, one less bound to singular types, operational requirements, and overt contextual references in favour of other factors. The second proposition is that certain form generation strategies and composition devices have more or less capacity to register multiple layers, whether they be topographic, social, programmatic, or formal. A number of interconnected themes bracket the analysis given architectural translation in the devices of scaling, registration and superposition; providing Eisenman an armature to register and control plan dispositions; as artificial ground, signalling a cut and an edge; and as marking the disappearance of a golden time in Eisenman's relation to certain architectural urban conditions. Unpublished materials from the Eisenman archives held at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal, provide primary source material for the research. The paper makes a contribution to scholarship on the work of Eisenman, adds to studies on architecture composition, and addresses the major Congress theme of intense asymmetric flows impacting architectural-urban form and aspects of Track 1 Diversity and Mixture with its emphasis on diverse kinds of architectural-urbanistic practices.

Introduction

Urban scale dissonances appear perhaps for the first time in Peter Eisenman's published projects with the 1978 drawings and model for Cannaregio West Town Square, Venice. Used more or less intensely in subsequent years, such conceptual ambitions and compositional strategies play a distinctive role in his Romeo and Juliet project presented at the Third International Exhibition of Architecture of the Venice Biennale, 1985. They reach a formal and theoretical peak about a decade after Cannaregio with the 1986 project for the University Art Museum, Long Beach, California.

Architectural investigations at work in the Long Beach project are underpinned by a number of questions that address architecture's potential capacity to express multiple conditions, the theoretical conceipt underpinning the project. Which formal and spatial strategies are at work in this project? Are there traits at work in Long Beach that may have translational capacity to contribute to disciplinary debates about the contemporary urban condition? In other words, might an analysis of the University Art Museum project reveal new conceptual and figural responses to urban scale strategies that can contribute to embracing and rendering diversity through apparently messy or weak forms?

Long Beach

In 1985 Eisenman received from the California State University at Long Beach the commission to design a 6,300-square metre (67,500-square foot) art museum to be located within an existing 9.3 hectare (23-acre) arboretum adjacent to the main campus entrance. Eisenman was occupied with various phases of the project over the course of 1986.[1]

Let us start with the site plan. If Cannaregio was Eisenman's 'first real site plan'[2], then it may be productive to compare the site plan strategies of Long Beach to Cannaregio as a start to taking the measure of excavation and it's different uses. In Long Beach, following a strategy explored for the first time in Venice, Eisenman begins with duplication and appropriation of fictional histories and the superposition of features real and allegorical onto a site. These histories concern land division, previous uses, and urban plans related to the specific Long Beach site. As Bédard and Balfour document comprehensively, and a longer study should consider in detail, nearly a decade after that first site plan in Cannaregio, Eisenman's form generation procedures are fully in motion.[3]

Used with no apparent order in early design development phases, figural decisions designate water in the final presentation materials for Long Beach. Here gold marks a former river bed (extruded into the museum building) and irrigation fields in a transfigured and re-scaled Jeffersonian grid. A first analysis of gold's use then is that it marks, as in Romeo and Juliet, non-architectural figures. In Long Beach a topological axis of symmetry traced as a gully or fault in the ground plane is the clearest manifestation. It is a line that connects nothing, however, inscribed in an operation more akin to grafting or binding or superimpositions explored in period projects. The grid has been now fully abandoned and there is a less a reliance on scaling despite what Eisenman claims in *Diagram Diaries*. Returning to those alchemical properties announced in 1978, Eisenman characterises Long Beach as part of a larger post-structuralist project on the discipline which endeavours to disrupt architecture's metaphysical realm with history now called on to occupy the place of fiction. He writes: 'The University Art Museum of the California State University at Long Beach does not symbolize the sheltering of art. In its stead, the program is the invention of a fiction about the building's own history.'[4]

As with other projects, there is a strategy of superposition that follows a story, in this instance a story about a two-hundred-year condition that records a past Gold Rush (1849), a recent present (1949, the year of the university's founding), and an imagined future (2049). These phases are crossed by a series of superimposed layers. The annotated sketch in Figure 1 begins to described these ideas. In a 1986 essay on the project, the 2049 state is labelled with four key layers: river + coastline + channel + fault line, all tokens of the disposition and generative strategies being tested.[5] In this regard, and to temporarily conclude the analysis of Long Beach, perhaps the substantive difference of gold's use from earlier projects is that it occupies both a ground and a figurative position in Long Beach. The irrigation fields to the top of presentation sheets function as a grid or field even if the orthogonal grid's edges are emphatically shaped or given a figural outline. The architectural manipulation thus denies any simple grid reading as compared for example to the underlying regular grid on Cannaregio. In a certain sense it is a field that functions as an event, this latter concept having an ongoing and increasing role in subsequent work of Eisenman.

In an interview published in 1986, Eisenman claims that projects from this period signal a shift in his work in several regards. The first concerns architectural time and the ideas of history and memory. With Cannaregio, Eisenman began to work on large-scale projects and he intentionally deploys the device of scaling among others as a means to destabilise what he claims are architecture's metaphysics of presence as suggested above. The latter for Eisenman is found in values of presence, hierarchy, and origins. Scaling up and down and the operation of folding into itself becomes in this logic a means for questioning these values and thus, according to Eisenman, opening up architecture to other possibilities as revealed in Long Beach.

A second shift relates to site and is expressed in ground manipulations including fictive archaeologies, that is histories real but absent or immanent and thus potential. Eisenman notes that Cannaregio was his 'first real site plan.'[6] This emergent awareness of, and concern with, site and traces real and fictional – absent from the Houses series which were conceived as groundless up to the late House X - becomes perhaps the signal characteristic of the decade's long investigation. The impact of this shift is clear in his project for Long Beach.

A third device is that of scaling, itself characterised according to Eisenman by three aspects: discontinuity, recursivity, and self-similarity.[7] Eisenman claims that scaling is a process different from traditional processes relying on or imbedding principles of presence and origin and he names these three aspects 'destabilising agents'.[8] Each of these agents targets conditions of an aesthetic of presence and origin and thus confirms the ongoing line of investigation begun in Cannaregio: discontinuity 'confronts the metaphysics of presence' exploited

in Long Beach; recursivity 'confronts origin'; and self-similarity confronts 'representation and the [ideal of the] aesthetic object'.[9] Different from Cannaregio, however, the impact of scaling at Long Beach emerges across the site itself as opposed to in discrete structures on the site, thus extending the critical operation to the entire built realm, both real and virtual. Scaling is one of several strategies tested in Long Beach as a means to introduce the idea of discontinuity into the city and architecture more specifically. Different from superimposition and transference understood as a one over the other, a transference which preserves properties, superposed figures see their properties transformed thus critically working on the ideal of a single origin.[10]

A fourth device is that of registration and here there are multiple registration references. Hays's interpretation of the consequence of the various registrations leads him to the idea of phase shifts[11], perhaps the single most distinctive move in period projects with complex two dimensionality supplanting the volumetric obsessions of the Houses series in the 1960s and 1970s.

An interview contemporaneous with the Museum's project's development and publication returns us to the transformative role of this project in his practice. To reinforce this, consider the spatial and visual outcome of intertwining grids and figures which lead to unreadability as a sign of the swerve underway in his practice. This requires a suspension of all the metaphorical tags that distract from what's really going on architecturally in Long Beach. We see that it is a matter primarily of surfaces: more so in Long Beach, less in Cannaregio which does cut the surface. A certain modernist trajectory is also present and at work on the surface in architecture. As Yve-Alain Bois says succinctly: 'despite all the historico-geological mythology', the Eisenman projects which are aligned with the city of artificial excavation should be seen for what they are, 'a surface strategy in which grids are a means of producing events.'[12]

Provisional Findings

In this brief analysis of one project by Eisenman a number of interconnected themes have been identified and responses however provisional suggested to the underlying propositions. I have suggested that in Eisenman's University Art Museum that architectural-urban form is generated not from type or use or context. Other factors come into play, with open space, circulation and built form given architectural translation by means of the devices of scaling, registration, and superposition. These provide Eisenman an armature to register and control plan dispositions and form transformations. Fictional histories create an artificial ground, marking a cut or an edge in various site plans where Eisenman is surprised to find a project axis that is not a path but exactly some form of cut or gully. This ground condition is deployed in period projects in Venice and Verona and returns again in the University Art Museum but differently translated, the museum volume rendered and tracing the highly irregular line of a former river bed.

As regards the litany of architectural questions in evidence, recent commentators provide suggestions useful to a synthetic view. In an effort to understand what is at stake in Eisenman's project for example, Rafael Moneo introduces a distinction between an architectural phenomenon and a building's impact. For Moneo, due in part to the dominance of partial grids and lattice structures at Ohio State, 'architecture emerges as an architectural phenomenon without assuming the condition of a building.' [13] This endless deferral to reaching 'the condition of a building' - whole, stable, with a sensible origin, remaining ever an architectural phenomenon – is perhaps an overarching ambition of Eisenman in the project considered. Form generation strategies and specific devices are deployed to install what Balfour, in a close reading of process sketches from Long Beach, calls a 'significant disturbance,'[14] echoing Eisenman's 'destabilising agents' as discussed elsewhere. There is a strategy of superposition for instance which Balfour uses to differentiate a simple layering of stable and hierarchical relationships, one which favours a condition in which no one layer or figure dominates, each reinforcing a shared instability. Registration is then used to control and revise endlessly the project into a state of 'significant disturbance'. This idea of significant disturbance is one way to organise potential impacts on architectural knowledge for Eisenman, such a state creating the conditions of possibility for the new, the unforeseen, and the potential to appear.

Bois provides a complimentary interpretation which is useful in relation to the final opening question, that of Long Beach's end game traits. In the course of a discussion about the difficulty in conceptualising events in Eisenman's archaeological projects, Bois notes: 'Perhaps it has to do with our inveterate difficulty in perceiving architectural events, while a long practice of cities leaves us better aware of the

sudden, silent jolt of a ghost.'[15] This distinction of city over event provides another clue to the shift in focus as can be seen in Eisenman's sudden sensitivity to any site's traces – real and fictional, past and present - revealing complexities previously unavailable to him and yet by 1986-87 with Long Beach now a constant in this thinking and practice, one whose potential for a more complex urban practice has yet to be theorised or exploited today.

In terms of further lines of research, one can be highlighted if only to show the particularly deep potential among the many questions that could be considered from this period in Eisenman's work. This concerns the question of the architectural figure. The idea of the figure, and those of the partial figure and the operation of partial figuration which appear later, continue up to today to be present in Eisenman's teaching and practice.[16] While I have not found an extended explanation of the figure, some questions provide a first bracketing of how to approach it. Urban scale form travels from background to figure to ambiguous figure: is this one approach to understanding the figure in Eisenman? Is the partial figure another term that breaks from the dialectic figure/ground, or figure/figure? Which kinds of manipulation are required to change for example the grid from matrix to figure? Greg Lynn provides a taxonomy of variations on this problem which should be considered in future investigation, the architectural figure in Eisenman displayed in figure/ground couples, figure/figure relations, residual figures, and figural intervals.[17] To these, alluded to in his recent seminars and studios at the Yale School of Architecture, can be added the partial figure and, from Eisenman's City of Culture of Galicia, a strategy of partial figuration. Such investigations will be saved for a subsequent study.

Endnotes

[1] *Cities of Artificial Excavation. The Work of Peter Eisenman, 1978-1988,* ed. Jean-François Bédard (Montréal: Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture; New York: Rizzoli International Publications): 134-136. See also Alan Balfour, "Documents of a Creative Process," in *Cities of Artificial Excavation*, 169-185, esp. 169.

[2] Peter Eisenman, "Interview with Lynne Breslin," *Space Design* 258 (March 1986): 63-65, 63.

[3] Balfour, "Documents of a Creative Process, 171.

[4] Peter Eisenman, "University Campus, Long Beach California Museum. The Museum Rediscovered," *Lotus International* 50 (1986): 128-135, 129.

[5] Eisenman, "University Campus," 134.

[6] Eisenman, "Interview with Lynne Breslin," 63.

[7] Peter Eisenman, *Moving Arrows, Eros, and Other Errors: An Architecture of Absence* (London: Architectural Association, 1986), plate 5.

[8] Eisenman, *Moving Arrows*, plate 4.

[9] Ibid.

[10] This is discussed in part by Eisenman in his "Interview with Breslin," 65. See also: Peter Eisenman, "The City as Memory and Immanence," *Zone* 1 (1986): 440-441, 441 on scaling as transferal.

[11] K. Michael Hays, *Architecture's Desire. Reading the Late Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2010), 66.

[12] Yve-Alain Bois, "Surfaces," in *Cities of Artificial Excavation*, 38-45, 42.

[13] Rafael Moneo, "Unexpected Coincidences," *El Croquis* 41 (October-December 1989): 52-61-, 57.

[14] Balfour, "Documents of a Creative Process, 176.

[15] Bois, "Surfaces," 44.

[16] On the later, see for example the 2012 advanced studio on the partial figure given at Yale: Peter Eisenman, Venice Project III: Figure/Disfigure, Unit 1104a, unpublished studio outline (New Haven: Yale School of Architecture).

[17] Greg Lynn, "Architecture versus Sculpture," in *Peter Eisenman. Barfuss auf weiss glühenden mauern/Peter Eisenman. Barefoot on White-Hot Walls*, ed. Peter Noever (Wien/Vienna: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004): 160-167, 162-165.