

An extremely Intellectual Crisis

Jacob Voorthuis

Crisis is a word that describes a specific moment in a serious illness: the moment at which the fever is at a pitch, the patient will either die if it persists, or survive if it breaks. Crises, in the medical world they come from, are slippery, undecided, and anxious moments just before the future is determined by the course of events.

An “Intellectual crisis” has, to be honest, something of the spoilt child about it. It rarely describes a live-or-die moment; rather it describes an “*I-am-bored-what-shall-we-do-now?*” kind of moment resulting in the intellectual putting his head in the sand. Why is this? The reason has at least two ingredients to it and a particular way of mixing them. Firstly, an intellectual crisis invariably emerges at the moment when the “failure” of something or other is being signalled. In this way we have the failures of historicism, modernity, post-modernity, of communism, of socialism, of capitalism, of Europe, or the Euro. However, the tragedy of intellectualism is that these failures do not in fact describe any failure of any system. If they describe anything observable at all, they describe the failure of us humans to stop cheating, subverting and abusing the systems to whom we like to devolve our responsibility, or whose restrictive climate we are, often understandably, trying to subvert. Modernity failed because we made a mess of it. Many of its actors and many of those affected by it didn’t really want it to succeed anyway. Socialism failed for the same reason and Capitalism is turning into a free for all because we are making a mess of it. We cheat, subvert, abuse and misuse everything others dream

up. If you need an explanation you can call it “our nature” and I hope that will teach you to ask for an explanation. That brings me to the second ingredient of every intellectual crisis. Such things are carefully constructed to make us charge at windmills. It is not that I am saying that it is we who are wrong with us. It is just that we are not very good at obeying grand schemes and restrictive strategies. “Mankind”, as the great Dadaist Dr Walter Serner wrote in 1917, during a period of humanity’s greatest failing: “is too weak to be really good, too good to be really bad. He is weak and, in consequence... base.” That was his cynical view. A view that was understandable during a filthy war. Not all of us are base even though most of us do base things occasionally. We are also capable of truly wonderful behaviour.

Intellectual crises come and go and I for one, find them less and less interesting as tools of intellectual discourse. They are a case of *mauvais foi*, an attempt to blame operating instructions rather than your incompetence. It is for this reason that I am highly sceptical of all grand panoramic descriptions of historical development. The reality of each intellectual crisis depends heavily upon the fictions that guide them. What I find more interesting is to ask myself and others this question: why do we keep on making a mess of things? Who judges things to be a mess and on what grounds? To what depth of human misery are we ready to sink in order to realise our fictions or to respond to this or that confabulated crisis? And when do we learn to negotiate the link between the way we talk and what we do more accurately?

For tonight the speakers were presented a fourfold crisis:

- The crisis of theory versus practice
- Of the privileging of market theory over a reliance upon the humanities

- Of the privileging of form over function or vice versa
- Of the architect as director versus the architect as expert

Four slippery choices one of them presumably leading to *the good* and the other presumably leading to *the bad*. I shall deal with them one by one until my time is up, leaving out the third which I believe was abandoned as a suitable crisis by the organisation.

The crisis of theory versus practice

The crisis with regard the opposition between theory and practice merely reveals our confusion. Let's begin by going over seemingly familiar territory so that we get the relations between things right in such a way that we have something to talk about. Here goes: rule no. 1: Practice is about doing things and nothing more. Rule no. 2: The ideas you might have about doing things and the kind of things you might want to do we shall call theory. And rule no. 3: Philosophy we shall take as the thinking of theory and practice. That is what Alain Badiou said, and I think he got it just about right there. So we might have a theory of fair design or a theory of sustainable design and practice tries to accommodate our wishes by making them come true. The role of philosophy in design then is to think things through at every stage of the way. It's that simple.

Now theory has a bad name in some quarters. Such people say: we talk and talk, while we should be doing things! So, people who talk the whole time without doing what they talk about give talking a bad name. But if you think about it, it should be the other way around, it should be their doing that is more properly seen as the problem. They do the wrong things. Alternatively, people who do stupid and horrible things because they hold silly ideas give practice a bad name while it is their theory that is the problem. No one escapes doing things, no one escapes having ideas

about what they do. So we all relate theory to practice and vice versa.

There is however a strange breed of architects who say: "I am a practical man, *I don't do theory.*" We all know them. Well, like with young puppies that have made a mess on the carpet, we should take their ears and push their noses into the mess they've made. Everyone *does* theory, silly! Those whose theory is that they *do not do theory* quite simply have a rather shabbily thought through theory that pretends to an anti-intellectualism that is merely pretentious and snobbish in an inverse sort of way. And that is quite the worst kind of snobbishness.

Of the privileging of market theory over a reliance upon the humanities.

I do not understand this opposition. People indulging in the humanities such as designers, artists, writers and such, all pursue the production of value and none of them would deny that. And if they do deny it, ask them this: "Do you think you are doing or making something of value to either yourself or someone else?" If they answer "no", don't believe them. You could take it a step further and see how they react when you wilfully destroy their supposedly valueless work. If they mind about what you are doing you will have shown them wrong. Value is *what matters*, by definition. The question is how that value is expressed. Some artists are happy to see value translated into cash; others would prefer that value to be translated into something less tangible, something like admiration, adulation or worship. All of them are led by the market of their choice. So the question is not *whether* architecture privileges intellectual value, use value, scarcity value or the value of delight over commercial value, the question is what kind of value do you want to create and what do you want for it in exchange? On existential grounds it is difficult to see why someone operating commercially within a capitalist market for cash is either better or worse than

someone operating within any other market for any other kind of value. The preference for one kind of value over another, or one way of expressing value over another cannot be decided without reference to the wider concerns of culture. Cash is, I think rightly, seen by some as *capable of good*. It is what you do with your money and how you arrived at it that defines you, not the fact itself that you have some and do something with it. That some people have a different take on this problem, is quite literally *their problem*. I say that not to be nasty or dismissive, but to be quite clear where the responsibility lies. And as I rather sympathise with that camp, *I know it to be my problem*. And as it is my problem, I have come up with this solution: I will let everyone pursue their idea of what is good, as long as this theory of the good does not interfere with my theory of the good, or with the theory of the good of someone I feel the need to take under my wing, such as my children, less privileged people etc. I would like things to be fair. When I design something I shall try to make sure that I achieve a win-win situation for those stakeholders that I can take into account. Furthermore I try to imbue everything I make with intellectual rigour and make it as rich and as rewarding as possible. If that brings me a salary with which I can make ends meet, I shall not complain. Should it bring me absurd riches, I shall certainly need to think about whether that is either fair or indeed sustainable. But that has not happened yet, so I have not had to deal with that one.

Of the privileging of form over function or vice versa

We should stop asking the question as to whether something is functional or not. We should ask how things can function. I propose we stop seeing form as somehow in opposition to function and ask ourselves this question while designing: How can we use this form well? How can we make sure people enjoy using the forms I have designed? How can we make sure that the activity for which I am designing is properly and comfortably and perhaps even enjoyably accommodated? A

wonderfully sculptural building functions well as an ornament to a city; that is a legitimate function for a building. A factory might function well to house a productive process, but if it is an eye-sore in the landscape the architect and the owner should feel ashamed. However, I really enjoy the sight of factories. A house should be used well if it accommodates all the various activities that a *pleasant way of dwelling* would appear to entail. For me a room is functional if it makes me enjoy being there doing what I am supposed to be doing there. It is not functional if I loathe being there even though I am expected to spend my time there. A good atmosphere, a lovely place to be, is functional. If people who end up using your building in some way say: "gosh that was nice", you've got things right as far as they're concerned. And don't tell me I am abusing the word functional by using it for things I shouldn't be using it for. If you feel that way I shall turn the accusation around: *You are abusing the word functional!* The function of ornament is to differentiate space, to separate the special from the everyday, to indicate *this is mine*. We study the behaviour of form to find the functions it affords. We study activities to improve their spatial accommodation. To oppose form and function is to be merely naïve about the way we think about them. In fact these two concepts constitute two sides of the same coin. Form behaves and behaviour is made possible by form. Function is getting form to behave well for our own use.

Now comes the only interesting opposition: Should the architect direct operations or should he be an expert of the built environment. I don't know. You decide. Personally I cannot see how the one could exclude the other, but that is my own personal little crisis.

Thank you.

