

TOWARDS A DESCRIPTIVE TECTONICS: MAKING A RELATION

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Who do you think you are? I'll reiterate that. Who do *you* think you are? Are you a nice person? Does your hairdresser think so too? And what about your boss? When you look in the mirror, what do you see? Are you sure about that? And when someone takes a photograph, what side of yourself do you show? Do you secretly like pneumatic ladies? Are you muscular? Or thin? Too thin? Fat? How and where does your inside project onto the outside world? Can I discover who you are from the clothes you wear? Do you like your hands? Do you occasionally tell a lie? How do you feel about that?

And now for something completely different, or is it? Somewhere in the centre of the discussion on tectonics we find Kenneth Frampton's monumental *Studies in Tectonic Culture, The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*, from 1995. Frampton did not just pursue history, he had a political mission. He wanted to set a tectonic approach to architecture up against a *scenographic* approach in order to counterbalance the visions of Charles Jencks and Robert Venturi and pull architectural practice from the quagmire of increasingly banal décorbuilding, an architecture that was strongly reminiscent of Adolf Loos's warnings of the Potempkinstadt. That was no trifling mission. Frampton believes both approaches legitimate, although he clearly prefers a *tectonic* approach to design, an explicit concern with the "poetics of construction". A building is, before it is anything else, he wrote, a construction. And with that he posited the primacy of construction and materialisation in the design task. Frampton's approach is many times more subtle and enjoyable than I have here summarized it and it has justifiably been received with much sympathy. The book is a classic and rightly so. By contrasting the atectonic (read scenographic) with the tectonic in this way, Frampton takes an *oppositional*, or, if you prefer, *dialectical* approach to architectural thinking. The choice is obvious; the two approaches each occupy a clearly defined area:

Architects that express the construction and their use of materials in their design, can be gathered under the umbrella of the tectonic, and those who do not, design atectonically.

By making the building into a representation of its own constructive or material logic, one approaches the design task tectonically; by building scenery whereby the construction or materialisation doesn't become the subject of that scenery constitutes an atectonic approach.

With the one, the atectonic, construction *serves* the intended spatial effect. With the tectonic, the construction *is* the intended spatial effect. It is all perfectly clear.

An oppositional approach also demands a set of underlying similarities and we find plenty of these. Both approaches after all, concern the *expression* and even *metaphorical working* of material and construction in the appearance of the building. Both approaches are concerned with the *language of architecture* with which it is possible to express a *message*, a coded *effect*. The atectonic expresses a different message to the tectonic. However, both are primarily preoccupied, that is intentionally occupied with the act of expressing something. At that moment everything becomes doubly clear. The tectonic understood in that way is in fact itself a form of scenography. The tectonic is a *mise-en-scène* of material and construction. The tectonic is an approach whereby the material of the building becomes its own subject. Both approaches are ways of building scenery. The only difference is that the tectonic is a scenographic approach to construction and material. The tectonic is an approach whereby the construction raises itself to a metaphor of itself, a surreptitious auto-icon expressing a curious sixties ethic "Be yourself man..."

There was nothing wrong with the sixties, even though they never understood the insoluble paradox inherent a phrase like that. There is equally nothing wrong with oppositional categories, they work well, despite the incisive destruction of oppositional thinking performed by the deconstructivist philosophers during the seventies and eighties, as long as one respects the conditions upon which they work. The only disadvantage is that such thinking appears to reduce the architectural debate to little more than "which décor shall we build?"¹ And then the scenery of construction appears, for some still obscure reason, to be a better choice of scenery than another. "Yes," I hear you say, "and rightly so, but if a building shows its construction, then surely that is not a question of décor, of scenery?" I would like to agree with you, but that is exactly the problem. Why not? Because scenery is a representation of

¹ Heinrich Hübsch, "In welchem Stil sollen wir bauen?", 1828.

something other than itself? I do not agree with you necessarily. However, if we take that as our game rule, that is fine with me, for is that also not the case here? In the modern building industry nothing is quite what it says it is. It cannot be without rubbishing other far more pressing concerns: building regulations, the drive towards the environmentally friendly, fire safety, complex services, built-in technology, all sorts of insulation, from special paints to thick stone wool blankets have wrapped themselves around everything. The best that can be achieved in a complex building, is the suggestion. And then we are surely back where we started: at a scenographic representation. If we really want to show a building in all its nudity we have to construct that nudity with a great deal of refinement: a new crypto-brutalism! There are fantastic examples of this. But if that isn't a form of scenery, I quite honestly wouldn't know what is. So the question remains: How can we decide that one kind of scenery is better than another? I don't think we can without taking the given situation to which the building is a response into consideration. And that brings me to my most important criticism of Frampton's oppositional approach. By positing the primacy of construction in architecture, the opposition of the tectonic and the atectonic acquires an uncomfortable proximity to other oppositions like moral and amoral, social and asocial. He tries to deflect that conceptual proximity and his sincerity is beyond question, but it sticks.

By approaching the tectonic in such an oppositional way the debate soon gets lost in the language of architecture and the criteria of judgement become those of honesty, the good, the pure and the purely architectural. These are absolutist categories engaging the artificiality of the objective. They can only be maintained in a world where we implicitly believe in absolutes such as the absolute metre. Just as Hegel did. And Frampton did. After all he posited the primacy of construction in the design task! So everything that somehow departs from that absolute, and his book abounds in examples, does just that and can be accordingly calibrated. The construction is thus more important than bodily experience, more important than use. But why? Because he believes that? Do you believe that?

Let us pause a minute. On what grounds can a building be thought honest, pure and good? As far as the predicate "honest" is concerned, a building can only be considered such on the basis of a foundational analogy: buildings are projections of man and have to behave according to our mores, our standards, values and norms.² A building that "lies" is objectionable because, and only because, a lying person is objectionable. That is the *only* basis for an architectural honesty. Similar arguments can be found for architectural purity etc.

But, and this may come as something of a surprise, it is not in fact a bad analogy. In fact it is a rather good one; the best we've got. The analogy between man and his products, as Karl Marx had already explored in *Das Kapital*, brings both into a magic sense of community, just as religions bring man into a magic sense of belonging to his land. His products *are* alive, but through him. And their liveliness is no lie, no mere metaphor. It is a real liveliness. It is the liveliness of response. It is the liveliness of the mirror. When we look at *the other* we must never forget that we always see ourselves. It is what Foucault called the heterotope. Buildings *are* just like people, it is true. They are spatial extrusions of humanity. As Churchill famously said, we form them, then they form us. So it is not *the fact* that Frampton bases his criteria of judgement on a human analogy. It is rather that he bases it on a rather paltry and narrow human analogy, one that got stuck somewhere between man as a full being and man reduced to the honest and the dishonest. Perhaps it is time to look at ourselves again and refine the description of man as a presence, as a set of structures, only one of which is his construction. In this way we can begin to practice that analogy anew.

But before we do that, where does this scenographic or tectonic morality and its idolatrous desire for authenticity come from? Well, it is no doubt as old as the walls of Jericho. It certainly plays an important role in the aesthetics of Plato who equated a beautiful chair with a well-made chair and posited the primacy of the permanent and the changeless. Carlo Lodoli revamped that aesthetic in the 18th century. But a decisive moment in its history came when Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin's apologia of the gothic was published in 1841. That was when the showing of construction was, not only encouraged as with Carlo Lodoli earlier, but equated and reduced to such hard-edged concepts as honesty and truth.³ Pugin took Wren's St Paul's as his example. Wren had, to his credit, understood the gothic principles of construction, using flying buttresses to bear the load of the vault covering the nave of the cathedral. At the same time, and crucially for Pugin, Wren had committed the ultimate sin of

² See *Good and Bad Manners in Architecture* by A. Trystan Edwards, 1924

³ Pugin, A.W.N. *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, John Weale, London 1841

allowing these buttresses to disappear behind a considerable screen onto which was printed the purely formal and decorative constructional grammar of classicism: pilasters, columns, architraves, niches etc. That was, according to Pugin, immoral! It became the start of a bleak period for Wren's reputation, from which he has never fully recovered. "You can decorate construction," was Pugin's slogan, "but you cannot construct decoration" and thereby hide the true construction of a building. It sounded so extremely convincing, so compelling! Nobody even paused to question the basis of this law, which is of course thoroughly and exclusively analogical. This morality with regard to the scenography of architecture lay at the foundations of modernism. The modernists were concerned, and lets, above all, be *honest* about this, with building a new scenery against the background of which the naive and thoroughly optimistic fiction of modern man could play out his new role. Honesty played a key part. Modernism is in fact a twentieth century style (oh how they hated the word!) which emerged from a nineteenth century morality. Nietzsche wouldn't have been fooled by the shiny whiteness of its products.

We have need of a concept of the tectonic which reflects current building practices as a result of the leaps in scale that have caused the profession to change. Changes of scale in terms of the people and parties involved in the making of buildings and changes in the sheer scale of the environments created, and scale of concern about the environment as a place where people and icebears can thrive. A reduced Hegelian dialectic based on an absolutism of thought and a simplified concept of progress does not help. Nor does it help if we do not revise our image of what a human being is and is about. For this we need a kind of thinking that is inclusive and pluralist and thoroughly subjective in the sense that Alain Badiou gives it, a kind of thinking that can help us account for quality in a fuller way.

Quality as a property of things does not reside in the thing that I find beautiful. Nor does it reside in me, the beholder. Quality forms and determines the relationship between us in the form of a description of a situation. Descriptions are acts of creation. Like interpretations, they are themselves independent works of art. Quality as a relationship undergone or described comes about through a consideration of the network of factors of which the object, the building in our case, and "I" the observing subject, form a part. It is my decision to *find* something beautiful. I disrupt the continuity of space and select: that. *That* is beautiful. I undertake the care and preservation of that relationship. But it is dynamic. Quality indicators such as good and beautiful are often dismissed as being arbitrary and subjective. They are certainly not arbitrary in the Dutch sense of "willekeurig" that is, subject to the judgment of a capricious will. They are, however, rightly subject to constant *arbitration*. The fear for the arbitrary has led to the attempt to subject words such as beauty and the good to the world of the objective, the world of nowhere.⁴ The objective has done well to describe the physics of life and nature but the objective will not do to describe the complexity of human desire. Desire is like runny cheese; it smells, and as you grasp it, it runs away between your fingers. You cannot use measurable criteria to define the relationship between me and the object of my finding. It makes a mockery of the true qualities of objectivism, which has given us science and it makes a mockery of man as a *full* and indeterminate subject in a situation. Such relationships do not allow themselves to be formalized into hard rules, not because they do not obey the laws of physics somewhere in their mechanics, but because they are situation bound. The objective calculus required for a proper objective description of a situation would be more cumbersome than the situation itself. Human beings are extremely clever at dealing with complexity by selecting, ignoring, generalising, singularising and prioritising. That is what we call consciousness. It is a method for dealing with reality. And the human brain learns. Tomorrow I may find something else. I am allowed to learn and grow in my learning and so change my mind about things. In fact if I fail to do that, people might start looking at me in a strange way. The opinions of a ten-year old, belong to the universe of ten-year olds, they are inappropriate to a man in the middle of a mid-life crisis.

That brings me to design. We should design not according to a shaky absolutism of thought. Not because it does not exist, but simply because it is way beyond our capacity to grasp it. Instead we should, in the existentialist tradition, actively search for and take our responsibility in every situation, by acting, in Alain Badiou's words, in fidelity to that situation: doing what we can, well on the basis of a number of stated axioms, such as for example the need for the dignity of man. We design spaces by exercising our capacity to judge in concert with our experience. Now that the experience of building has become so thoroughly professionalised that means that discourse and partnerships have become

⁴ See Merleau Ponty

crucial.⁵ At the same time architects, who have professionalized themselves beyond the human, have to specifically exercise their humanity in order to remember what they are doing it all for. If we want to use the human analogy in our design thinking, and I think that is no bad thing, it becomes immediately obvious that we could never get away with positing the primacy of construction. Man is more than a construction, surely! He is no “*before anything*”. He is man. That is why I asked you who you think you are. Deleuze rightly, in my view, brought Spinoza’s remark to the fore, about us not knowing what a human body is capable of. It is precisely by positing a mythical *purity* of man, something that he is *before anything else* that objectifies him, reduces him to just one of his many modes. A woman is not *primarily* a sex object; the Caribbean slave rightly objected to being seen as an industrial tool. Even so, they were both used as such, just as a film director is useful to make films. But that reduction was humiliating for the woman and the slave to an extent it isn’t for the film-director. What is the difference? The question becomes: How can women maintain themselves as women, as full human beings without being denied their sexuality and us men the enjoyment of that sexuality? How can we use people to husband the earth without reducing them to industrial tools? How can we construct buildings for people who are *before anything else* simply people: vain, opportunistically honest, good when given the chance, mean when defensive, generous when able, mean when bitter. Man is *before anything else, man*. I would here like to reiterate that famous slogan of the sixties: Be yourself man...” I know that such small circular tautologies are unsatisfactory and confining, but there it is.

So the essence of architecture is far more than just its construction. The essence of architecture is that it is a product of man-in-the-world. Of course, and I think nobody would deny this, architecture distinguishes itself from other things in the special way that it is made; construction rightly assumes a privileged place in the thinking about good architecture. But that also applies to the configuration of social space. And in any case, who says that you should only approach architecture on the basis of how it distinguishes itself from other forms of practice? That is a form of logical extremism, a misplaced purism of thought and will always and irrevocably lead to an absurd position. It is surely far more convincing to approach architecture on the basis of her complete working as human product, a human supplement. Construction is an important aspect of that, as it is in a human body, but not the only one, and construction seen in that way becomes an integral part of something large: A building is, *before it is anything else*, a structure that can be used and undergone. Use and undergoing that is crucial.

Despite this turn, I do not think that my position differs fundamentally from that of Frampton. The architects he deals with sympathetically are often my favourites too. I love his descriptions. Having said that I am not concerned with learning the language of architects, I only interest myself for an architect’s intentions when certain conditions have been satisfied. I am too Dutch for that, too Calvinist. I mistrust intentions. Not because I mistrust people, but because I know that intentions are just beginnings, never endings. Intentions are nice and do well in speeches. But buildings are more than intentions, they are the product of them, a very different thing; they are the surroundings of the everyday. There is, lets be honest, nothing so damning as the judgment: “He meant well.” Buildings are things delivered unto people. And intentions are only interesting in so far as they succeed without detracting from a full life. So I undergo buildings on the basis of what the philosopher John Rawls called *a veil of ignorance*.⁶ I practice wearing that veil. Nowhere in the debate about the tectonic can one find a discussion about the simple presence of a building. It is always about *this* being an expression of *that*. And *that* is precisely where the professionalised discourse of architecture begins to separate itself from the discourse of the user. When the building is a representation, a theatrical performance, it becomes an object narrowed to a set of codes. In order to approach the object as a representation one needs to be armed with the conventions and the jargon of the language it was written in, frequently mistaken for the idea of style. That is where the user and the architect threaten to lose each other, especially when the architect only writes plays for other architects. But a user lives under a veil of ignorance with regard to the formalised language of architecture. He undergoes that language in a different way. That is not a bad thing by the way. The user does not experience it as a problem. By approaching and entering a building, “I” the user, undergo the spaces I traverse. *I* forge a relationship with that building, *my relationship*, which is *my responsibility*. The refinement and the language of the architect are foreign to me. His poetry speaks loudly and clearly in the space as I walk through it, but I do not understand it. I hear the words, their connected cadence, the building’s rhythms, its assonances,

⁵ Aesthetics is a discipline that concerns itself with providing descriptions of desirable qualities. In my view it is a discipline loosely affiliated to the concept of justice, rather than that of truth. See John Rawls, *A theory of Justice*, Rev. Edition 1999.

⁶ Zie John Rawls, *A theory of Justice*, Rev. Edition 1999.

its discontinuities, but I do not understand the story told by the architect. I let it wash through me as the wonderful stanzas of Dante spoken by a proficient actor, without knowing Italian. I stop trying to understand the story and I undergo the building in my own way and generate meaning to my experience of it in the acoustics, the way the light falls on its surfaces, the smell of materials and events, the dynamics of the surfaces as I move through the spaces, the use and touch of doorhandles, the intuition of movement as I read the signs of wear to pull or push the door, the subtle announcements and suggestions of new spaces, the intuitive logic of the route and the stupefaction of an extraordinary construction. I build up memories in that building, my memories, to which no architect has access: social situations determined by space. Space is always social. There are no exceptions to that.

The problem is that the veil of ignorance is what many architects have taken off in their rush towards professionalisation. Much of that professionalisation should be about making buildings intuitive experiences, well thought through social spaces, however limited the possibilities. Professionalisation has to now recuperate the veil of ignorance.

The faculty building in which we find ourselves, I consider to be one of the great buildings in the Netherlands. I hold it up as exemplary. It was a chemistry faculty and was thought through again as a faculty of architecture, building and planning. It is a fantastic act of scenography. It sets the scene for learning about buildings. That performance of learning is rehearsed with every movement. As I ascend the staircase I am confronted with my height. I walk past a showcase window announcing the events of the day. As I walk on, disturbing some lecture that is going on right here, I get a glimpse of students talking to each other in the canteen, as so much architecture is talk, and rightly so. Then I walk past the atrium and see the students at work, doing what they do best with complete absorption: testing ideas in form. I walk through the building past an exhibition, always carefully curated by Jos Bosman; I take the lift which miraculously shoots through the roof at the third floor and gives me Eindhoven's skyline, and then I arrive at my floor and I walk into my intimate office and observe a grand theatre of work. On my way I have enjoyed the slanting light on the concrete wall with its own history. I have puzzled about the ceiling, the columns and the glass. Am I told at this point that the pattern of the curtain wall is in fact an abstraction of the scaffolding of the Sagrada Familia. I smile, but in reality that reference starts getting in the way of my bodily experience; my experience of the curious transparency of the skin of this building, and experience I find infinitely more exciting than that rather forced reference towards "education as building". It is a fun reference perhaps, but the skin is so much more than a reference, so much more than a symbol, it works. It is the curious shimmer, the aura of the building as much as its transparency, the sheer verticality and the sharpness of its details, the movement I have to undertake to negotiate the building, the spaces I have to practice before I truly understand them by making them my own. That is truly exciting and makes me fall over backwards every time. But the symbol somehow imposes itself and whispers in my ear. If I am not careful it starts detracting from the fullness of possibilities. It starts objectifying my experience. What role does the tectonic play in all that? The tectonic has never escaped its nineteenth century principles of metaphor, not in Semper, for all his subtlety, and not in Frampton. That should become the next step. My proposal is to carry the debate onto another level.

A descriptive tectonics

Architectural discourse covers three broad areas: using, making and quality. The one is for some reason invariably defined in terms of the two others. They are irreducible. The tectonic describes the area of making, but always in terms of use and quality. The pragmatic covers the area of use and aesthetics covers the area of quality and the thinking of quality in relation to making and use. Now, take any quality that can be described. Silence! How does one build silence? How does one build a hushed voice? The conversation about this between architect, client, contractor and the various users provides a full programme of requirements. In such a conversation I envisage a desired quality to lead to a discussion about usefulness and makability. Imagine I want a museum. What is a good museum? A good museum is a place where people like to gather to undergo Works of art or other curiosities. The "liking to gather" and the "undergoing" are, from the point of view of the visitor at least, central issues and determine the design task. In order to enjoy going somewhere, a number of factors play a role that could be described as architectural: factors that could be defined by answering questions like: is it comfortable, have I a sense of the special? The undergoing of works of art, is a fully architectural concern where it is not the work of art itself that has to do the work. He one has to ask questions like: Are the works properly placed? Do they have sufficient and appropriate light etc. In order to design a good museum we think about the qualities that a museum has to have available on the basis of our experience in the areas of using and making. Then we design and make it and practice it in our use of

the museum. What role will be assigned to construction and materialisation in the qualities we strive for? I will not answer that question. But that is the question of tectonics.

For the designer architecture is a synthesis between three distinguishable structures. The structures of use, of which the configuration of spaces is one of the most significant, the structures of a given situation with its dispositives and affordances, and the structures of material, which supports and divides, or at least filters. The direction that the design takes in the attempt at synthesis is the wish, the desire. In order to realize a quality the designer has to specify that quality in terms of use and makability. The tectonic is a theme in architectural discourse in which the materialization of that desire takes central place. Coming back to Frampton, we now do not have to think in terms of opposition. Nor do we have to “catch” Mies at purported dishonesties. We can now make explicit the relationship between a quality, its possible and infinite uses and its makability. The performance of structure is just one of them, and one which generates good architecture as well as architecture with a backache; finely tuned architecture as well as banal emotional bulldozers. The relationship between these structures of use, construction and situation should not be evoked by representation but by laying the conditions for experiential quality. Representation is objectifying and merely allegorical. Fun, but ultimately little more than a game of trivial pursuit, where ignorance is looked down upon. Presentation of a quality is bodily, non allegorical and sublimates ignorance. It is sublimely subjective.

Trust your own imagination. I am sure it works well. You have been asked who you think you are. Now try to picture a building using the following words.

- Raw tectonics
- Surgical tectonics
- Muscular tectonics
- Skin tectonics
- Veil tectonics
- Mask tectonics
- Camouflage tectonics
- Auratic tectonics
- Naked tectonics
- Pneumatic tectonics
- Womb tectonics
- Psychotic tectonics
- Paranoid tectonics
- Schizoid tectonics
- Neurotic tectonics
- Erotic tectonics
- Whispering tectonics
- Secretive tectonics
- Aspiring tectonics
- Depressive tectonics
- Transcendent tectonics
- Polite tectonics
- Rude tectonics
- A tectonics of silence
- Of music
- Of noise
- Of the whisper
- Of glory
- A tectonics of the environment
- Of partnership

And every time you fall into representation, into the objective, you know you are doing just that, speaking a language, making objects. We need a tectonics of the fully subjective of subjects. Of the full human analogy, not of the narrowing objective. When you are able to realise the quality by making it, by laying the conditions for others to undergo that quality you are extending the human analogy well beyond the merely allegorical. You have in fact embodied it. Let buildings live.