Fulcrum
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LOS ANGELES.

bespoke industrial.

interview with g.lynn

Fulcrum: In an earlier interview (#11) Brett Steele described a "flip" in the 90s, from post modernism as a "form of knowledge dominated by historical interest" to being driven by tools. He suggested the flip was so quick perhaps the two things were one and the same.

Greg Lynn: In my experience, it unfolded a little differently. Yes postmodernism was very dominant, but in my opinion the shift in was the Deconstructivist Architecture show [MoMA 1981].

Even as a student, when I knew Brett at Princeton, I detected a shift from symbolism to geometry and this is why I was so interested in geometry even before the digital tools were available. This was all before the technological shift. With the decon[structivist] show there was a move from the historical references, that were primarily figural and linguistic, to constructivist historical precedents that were primarily geometric and spatial.

So I think it was decon that made the break with postmodernism. Yes, digital technology followed decon very rapidly, but first there was a shift from linguistics to geometry. For example, the Folding and Architecture book that I edited was intended to take decon directly into digital technology... and afterwards, that's where things got vocational.

F: You spoke about choosing to study at Princeton as a type of provocation to the conservative guard of "bow ties". Who, or what, are the "bow-ties" today?

GL: I was at Princeton at the apex of Michael Graves' influence and everybody was very smug. It was the time of Robert Stern's television show "Pride of Place" and Venturi, Graves and others had the formal sophistication of the New York Five with a historical and cultural hook. So I have to admit, the twenty-somethings that were hanging around in bow-ties were about a commitment to knowledge. As much as I hated the postmodernist dynasty there, one of the things I loved about Princeton was that the students were very competitive about historical knowledge. They would indulge themselves in a sport of identifying buildings by the tiniest cropped details; an architectural version of 'name that tune'. This is something that I miss in the students today. Even the best schools today don't have that sense of deep disciplinary or historical knowledge. There was clearly a reaction to this kind of bricolage, but sadly it was entwined with knowledge that was thrown out with the bath water.

F: What is the status of the architectural drawing, particularly following the discussion at Yale's recent conference "Is Drawing Dead?" in which you participated?

GL: For me what was shocking at the Yale event were the historians who admittedly didn't understand the first thing about digital technology, but nonetheless felt qualified to criticize digital drawing. Imagine having to theorise or write a critical history of perspective without understanding how a perspective is constructed. At the Yale event it was abundantly clear that criticism, theory and history of digital drawing was delinquent, as the historians had no knowledge or aptitude in the medium, only its end product. This situation will get solved in time, but until then we are in a critical and theoretical crisis more than a design crisis. When designers are left without critical theory other than their own we run the risk of becoming vocational teachers of technique only and this is a bit of the situation we find ourselves in. Back to Brett's comment: yes, we are living in vocational times in many ways. I remember how journalism received my work say 15 years ago, and it was just impossible, as everything was about a new style or what things looked like to an uninformed eye. What came out of the Yale symposium is that, with the exception of Mario Carpo, the historians and theorists attending were ill-equipped to talk about the digital.

F: What role does scale play in architecture after the advent of the digital?

GL: Right now, parametric is such a bad term because it is big and imprecise.

Despite Patrik's theoretical efforts, what it gets used for more often than not is the modification of details by larger controlling geometry. There used to be a part-to-whole sensibility with scale as the connection between disparate or hierarchical materials or systems.

Procedural modeling, or parametric modeling, makes scale really abrupt; there's a mega control of geometry and there is a micro-scale of varied elements. Say standardised but varied, something I associate with Norman Foster; the form is often very brute and the detail is very fine.

F: Calibration?

GL: I've always had, right along with virtual tools, machines for making lots of models. Because of this, the only thing I've ever been surprised about in scale terms was jewellery. I think this is because I was designing it on screen, which is larger than real scale. Similarly, Kevin Roach told me they used to make double size models and drawings of their details so there were no surprises; I almost always work in parallel with large models and prototypes early in the digital process which is why I've had CNC mills, laser cutters and 3D printers in the office for more than a decade; roughly coincident with Silicon Graphics workstations.

F: Last week at sciARC Peter Eisenman set out the terms 'practice' and project' as a way to categorize work being produced in architectural offices today- "practice" funds "projects". What do you make of that distinction?

GL: He's just wrong in every way. I don't even know where to start.

F: How do you define project - for him project was a larger research problem?

GL: Yes, but why would that not be practical? 'Capital P' project architects are the wealthiest, unless I am mistaken and 'capital P' projects are where you get the best fees. There is a lot of money in designing culturally ambitious projects. As far as I can tell there isn't much money in un-ambitious services, the scope is so much smaller.

F: Which is odd, because it is the opposite of what he was trying to establish.

GL: For me, huge offices with really small margins aren't as attractive as small offices with really huge margins. I think the biggest threat to architects looking to transform the civic realm is the devaluing of the field due to technology that allows lower and lower fees for work that is less and less in the public sphere. Some clients understand there is commercial value to having a cultural project. It might be that the cultural projects are different today... that would be a whole other topic.

What OMA has done by establishing a graphic design and advertising company (AMO) is ingenious, but the 'capital P' Project of the 70s is now very different, and not just about the masterpiece building in the city.

F: What was the Project back then?

GL: Slightly autonomous, in a discussion with history... I doubt Kahn would approve of a graphic design company within his office. This might be where postmodernism kicks in. I met John Hoke from Nike; he not only studied architecture at U. Penn but worked for Michael Graves. He learned the architect's approach to industry and culture, collaborating with Alessi and Target, then took that knowledge with him to Nike. What he's now doing with their production chain is amazing – the way we do a building, they do shoes. No building is identical to another, despite using industrial components, now the same is true of Nike. They are also following architecture in terms of tools and starting to treat their customers the way a "shoe architect" would, as clients.

The number of industries that want to do what architects have been doing with buildings for the last few centuries, which is to put together a set of documents that lets you make a one-of-a-kind thing using industrial tools, is exploding exponentially. Everybody wants to do it: with cars, clothes, furniture, appliances... So, that's why people come to learn it from us and then take it to other places.

Michael Graves with Target, and many architects with Disney, were entering this wider cultural field decades ago, and it did coincide with the reign of postmodernism. Now, style is less interesting, and what seems more attractive to clients and broader culture is the method by which virtual documents are used to specify industrial processes for particular clients that want complex, bespoke, context-specific things. This need not be limited to buildings and very soon there will be architects for things like cars, instead of mass-produced objects by designers working with focus groups and marketers. It's inevitable.

Greg Lynn is an architect (Greg Lynn FORM), designer and theorist. He currently teaches at The Angewante, UCLA & Yale. Interview by Sarah Hearne.

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