Ross Adams

Reversals of Place: Two Proposals in Architectural Futility

The following two projects each attempt an ironic reversal of the urban conditions in which they are sited. The first project, set in New York City, proposes a second city to be constructed on top of the existing city as its mirror image. The second proposal aims to disrupt current gentrification processes in London by building an "unsavory eyesore" connecting neighborhoods that have recently undergone gentrification. These proposals, both somewhat outlandish in their scope, could be construed as fantastic commentaries that not only highlight the "invisible" practices of development at work in these cities, but also offer ways of turning such practices on their heads.

A Narcissistic Proposal for New York

Capitalism at t₀: The end result of Late Capitalist Urbanism. A result so frozen in its own processes as to render the task of the Architect into a bathroom and kitchen consultant, and that of the Urbanist, into a bureaucrat. This project sets out to understand better the mechanisms behind this version of urbanism through an architecture which ultimately exposes key characteristics intrinsic to the machine of New York City.

I was initially inspired by Koolhaas' proposal that the uncanny juxtaposition between façade and interior program is fundamental to the success of New York City. As such, this necessary dissociation between these elements becomes the architectural rule of Manhattan, as opposed to the exception. As a rule, this potentially reactive relationship is neutralized and thus made banal. Given this architectural-scale phenomenon, can we observe similarly neutral juxtapositions at other scales? Can there exist a boundary separating two contrasting elements whereby the potential energy across this boundary is not absorbed and dissipated into the banal?

Looking at the scale of a block, one recalls Koolhaas' City of the Captive Globe, in which he posits that each block functions independently from one another to contain and foster its own identity. He suggests that each block architecturally themes itself, that within a single Manhattan block each building operates cohesively with all others toward a single narrative. If this is true, what would define a "ridiculous" relationship between two buildings in New York City? Or does the overriding condition of this "Mutant Urbanism" allow for endless transposition of any Manhattan building from place to place without order or consequence?

In such a situation, one can potentially reveal the most about a given mechanism by introducing an architecture which opposes or perhaps provides a contradiction to the mechanism's observed character. In this case, the desire is to create an intervention whose function is to generate a boundary which segregates two entities within the city. In doing so, the separa-
tion must intensify the opposing characters of one condition to the other.

The given site of the project is on the rooftop of the Dia Center located on West 22nd Street, between 11th and 12th Avenues. Here, the artist Dan Graham has built an installation called Two-Way Mirror. By alternating between reflection and transparency, the piece attempts to reposition the body of the viewer within the context of the surrounding urban rooftscape. I propose to retrofit and conceptually project the Two-Way Mirror. Using this same semi-reflective glass and the Graham piece as a datum, a level glass membrane can be stretched across the entirety of Manhattan to create a second ground plane, a "newly conceived public space." The imposition of such a plane intends to create two sharply contrasting worlds: Below the plane exists a hyper-Manhattan where the city's narcissism is taken to an extreme and the entire city can now fully thrive in its own reflection. Above the plane, a new city has been created, one in which the "dogma" of the grid has been abolished and replaced by an open, uninhibited surface. On this surface the reflection of the sky hides the realities of the world below. Access is limited through retrofitting the Two-Way Mirror into an elevator which carries visitors across to The Anti-Manhattan.

To realize this project would take great resources and cooperation—a highly impossible assumption. However it is in this step that the Visionary Project becomes an active tool. Therefore one must imagine a feasible way to develop such a proposal. As such, the Dia Center could establish a program open to the public, whereby individual real estate owners, moguls, and developers are offered membership for themselves and a limited number of guests in the largest art installation ever constructed. The membership "fee" is the extension of each building's existing structure to the specified height and structural requirements of the new glass plane (buildings higher than the proposed plane can donate lateral structure). The plane becomes something of a giant pseudo-timeshare for investors.

The expected reality, of course, is that the construction of the plane will reach a stunted point of homeostasis which destroys the proposed continuity. Thus, the fractures created by this discontinuity heighten the perceived value of one's contribution, deceptively bestowing a semblance of private ownership to the portion of glass supported above one's building. Furthermore, this utopian, communal public space is ultimately dead space: The city below becomes the spectacle. The "Hyper Manhattan" becomes a city of desire. Through both of these results, territories are defined, "plot-lines" drawn, and public space distorts into private peep shows of the city's former self. From this gaze, New Yorkers engage in a collective (yet individually-executed) experiment of self-valuation.

It is precisely the boundaries of ownership—those seemingly inactive edges that previously created the juxtapositions of the banal—which shatter the continuity of the imposed plane. Each building demands its own hegemony and the subsequent mapping of fractures projected onto the plane correlates to the mapping of property lines below. Thus the plane functions as a projection screen, revealing the presence (through fracture) of otherwise hidden lines from the city below, and realizing the power of the heretofore innocuous.

London Bridge: Proposal for an Unsavory Eyesore

This project takes as its critical premise that London's Thames River, while accumulating more and more monumental architectural objects (London Eye, Millennium Bridge, etc.) functions only in the service of division: In the presence of more and more architectural debris, North and South London are still severed by the quiet, muddy Thames. The task set forth by the studio asked for each participant to begin the project with a conceptually-directed site research portion, followed by a design proposal for a new type of "bridge."

Projected gentrification occurring at existing bridges.

Current Gentrification trends.
Within the scope of my own trajectory, I began to raise several critical issues: How are the current bridges over the Thames functioning, and how are they falling short of their purported connectivities? What is the role of such spectacular architecture with relationship to the division between North and South London? What are the spill-over effects of attempting these connections with such means? A secondary subtext can be read from the intentionally naive proposal of this project, which questions the effective performance and ultimate role of an architecture which attempts such "noble" social endeavors as the one proposed here.

My proposal first called for a footbridge across the Thames, providing direct access from Battersea’s streets to Chelsea’s rooftops. Located at the ends of the bridge, on top of existing residential buildings in Chelsea are Parasitic Low-Income Housing Units. Provided with each is a fire-escape-like stairway giving one hundred percent access to the street level from the housing units. The housing units stack clumsily on top of the existing structures underneath, creating what it anticipated to be an "unsavory eyesore." As Parasites, they aim to drive out their hosts, replacing them with former residents of Battersea, who can afford to live in the now devalued real-estate. The entire structure is temporary, remaining only until sufficient de-gentrification has occurred. The housing units will then be re-assembled elsewhere in order to disrupt and diversify other areas of economic homogeneity.

Notes:
2 Ibid. 294 See also 97
3 Graham’s Two-Way Mirror is a 32’ square raised pavilion sided by semi-reflective glass walls of approximately 9’ in height on each side. In the center of the pavilion is placed a cylinder of the same glass.