A Short Contemplation on Money and Comedy

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*Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art... Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art.*

- Andy Warhol

Money

The poses that architects adopt when discussing money are familiar. In one of these poses, the architect becomes the earnest Rotarian, the responsible steward of the budget. Like those who contend that the marketplace is laden with values, the budget-minded architect associates professional wisdom with an education in economizing. He warns his followers with paternal tolerance against naive notions about breaking the rules of developers and other clients. In another traditional stance, one persistent even among the youngest practitioners, the architect is the debonair and glamorous professional. His worth is directly proportional to the amount of client’s money he spends. He has things done. He marries rich. He imparts to his interns the architect’s helplessness, but not without the kind of hierarchical “brotherhood” within which he would be heir to opportunities and money. He pretends to be different from the boorish steward of the budget. In his dependent state, however, he is remarkably similar.

Despite this dependence and uncertainty, architects often consider “real world” projects in school and in practice to be buildings on sites with geometric boundaries and clients that either await the architect’s obedience or his tasteful restyling. These sites may appear to be direct reflections of practice and of traditional notions of finance, but may as well be the most unreal reflections of the real world that lays outside the “brotherhood” and of its spatial production and valuation.

Most building in the twentieth century has been primarily directed by logistical and financial parameters. The dominant architecture of any subdivision has very little to do with aesthetic and formal skills or with the building as an object. The mid-century residential subdivision, for instance, was not about the design of houses as individual buildings, but instead reflected a serialized set of construction activities, real estate formulations and construction processes with procedural, temporal and physical parameters. Architects have done their best to remedy the tastelessness of suburbia by aestheticizing the house. In a further, completely impossible proposition, they have attempted to aestheticize the entire organization of the subdivision. The subdivision,

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however, was designed as a banking and employment procedure which used building, and specifically home building, as its vehicle. Houses were the perfect subjects for banking insurance in the Federal Housing Administration’s new mortgage schemes, and since home building employed the largest number of trades, it best addressed depression-era unemployment. Houses were generic units of space formatted for most American industries. They were, like currency, valued for their uniformity.

Subdivisions were important rehearsals for formats like global franchises – shopping centers, transportation hubs, entertainment centers, and privatized suburban communities, for example. These formats, which have become the predominant means of making space in America and around the world, are sited in processes, financial structures and physical components with powerful spatial consequences. They often directly reflect the financial organizations that create them. These organizations do not merely facilitate the architecture; they are the architecture.

For instance, the logistical protocols that govern today’s modes of manufacturing may be the most valuable property of the new businessman. Virtual factory organizations that previously performed many jobs under one roof now outsource those jobs to different, often international locations. Often designed for just-in-time production, these factories only exist as a networking protocol and only then in response to consumer demand. For a company like Virgin Atlantic the chief product is not any one of its services or merchandise items. It is a management style that can be used to sell any kind of product or service. Formats of retail activity, controlled by what their designers call “real estate products,” are perhaps the clearest examples of immaterial, procedural “sites” that closely reflect financing. For instance, the real estate product of a mall is different from that of a “power center,” a shopping center composed of superstores. These formats are described by different planning, parking and merchandising schemes, which are the main attributes of their spatial layout. Despite their immateriality, referring to these schemes as products is accurate; real estate products are intermediate architectural entities that reflect a volatile set of economic determinates and cultural desires. Though they shape a huge volume of square footage they change as rapidly as do their financing protocols. In fact, retailers, by arranging the composition of the shopping experience of a mall, are the real “directors” of its construction. When the lending game begins, developers seeking capital for a shopping center will be more successful if they have procured well-marketed tenants. These tenants, knowing their importance to the developers’ financing strategy, will try to negotiate a low rent in exchange for their participation in the mall. Potential tenants’ space is, throughout its production, an ephemeral reflection of the market’s perception of value. At these secondary levels of commerce, predictions about the behavior and financial success of a shopping format are themselves commodities, and therefore a site in the process of spatial production.

Whether retail, residential or infrastructural, these generalized solutions, universal attachments and franchisable management styles are, like the suburban house, a form of currency. They are in some senses made of money.
Their organizational procedures define a site - one documented and manipulated in a way that is very different from the conventional site. A site plan for a generic development format would not identify the property boundary and the north arrow. Rather, it would identify the organizational parameters and financial limits which cannot be described by the tools of geography or geometry, and which expand the site into a logistical field. This kind of site plan would record the parameters of a process – a process with spatial consequences. It would index the critical dimensions for a set of components and parameters in a system. Knowing these, even in the absence of a geographical site, one could design an adjustment or a fitting that might then be repeated hundreds of times. Changing one small physical detail, the size of the orange Formica booth or the metal panel, would recalibrate many other steps of the process, and would have exponential effects within a repetitious spatial format. One tiny adjustment, like an interest rate shift, may change hundreds of square feet around the globe.

Comedy

Generic spatial formats are heir to preconceptions about banality and monotony, and they are usually accompanied by conservative claims of optimization. These claims, however, can quickly become impossible within the comedies of the marketplace – a marketplace that pivots not around values but around unpredictable details. Many pivotal moments in spatial production are fueled by mistakes and risks that we might treat opportunistically. Though we think of these shifts as small, tactical, ephemeral, and untraceable, they are also caused by deliberate inventions that find some way of “tripping the lock” and entering the marketplace. Amplified by large volumes of consumption, their effects can be gigantic. The generic, as it turns out, is not a sensible place with conservative values. It is a loud, exaggerated, risky place whose hilarious details and fads often create temporary pockets of public space.

The volatility of these formats increases the possibility for some opportunistic infiltration of them. For instance, at the same time that Woolworth’s and Montgomery Ward are going out of business, catalog sales are booming and super anchors like Wal-mart, Kmart, or Target, hybrids of the discount and department store, are among the most powerful elements in the retail landscape. Theories about the psychology of the retail experience also change rapidly and amnesically. The mall format, having just completed a half century of growth, is becoming obsolete due to the shift toward superstores. Once located on the outer ring of malls, feeding off of their parking lots during non-peak hours, superstores have now virtually inverted that format. Superstores allow a consumer with a specific market profile to drive right to the door and avoid the slow public space of the mall. They often create their own slow spaces with furniture, food and entertainment. For superstores, being deeply merchandised often means being narrowly merchandised, yet many new retail formats offer new and more diverse mixtures of services products and entertainments, everything from coffee to D.J.s to music videos and motion pictures. Some are affiliated with other chains and franchises, and
begin to form small, mall-like groupings within the store itself. Although each of these formats claims to be part of a new selling psychology, most of the marketing ploys are recycled from previous formats. Yet they still have the power to replace a very similar organization. Building typologies are less meaningful now that most building is accomplished with simple boxes enclosing a changing set of desires. Similarly, organizational typologies have also become less distinct or even interchangeable. Generic schemes for offices, malls, entertainment centers, theaters, and other programs often form new conglomerates in the same way that various means of streamlining consumption are adopted and discarded. In just one of many examples, Incredible Universe, a Tandy store that has 150,000 to 190,000 sq. ft., or approximately 4 acres, under one roof, is a hybrid between a trade show and an amusement park. The customers are called “guests” and the sales people are called "members of the cast."  

Though perhaps attracted to the spectacle, architects are often not attracted to the illogical or volatile mechanisms of spatial change. It is much easier to associate the profession with desires for permanence and stability; no other art or craft celebrates “firmness” as its motto. Architects often “translate” activity into forms representing dynamism. When faced with environments that cannot be addressed with a single building envelope but rather with a programmatic system of multiple parts, they are attracted to the possibility of optimal patterns or a comprehensive understanding of these systems.

Perhaps a better role for the architect is not that of an optimizer but that of a comedian. Architects typically love manners, utopias, and crises. We love to make difficult questions harder. We love to train themselves to do labor-intensive tasks. We are very well prepared to juggle complex organizations and problems that involve correlative thinking. In the meantime, we continue circling Latin mantras, modernist mottoes, and familiar conundrums involving theory, history, practice and representation. What other profession has so many numerologists, so many who love sophistry, so many earnest heroes, so many do-gooders, and so few comedians? Architects are often the keepers of those manners at which comedy takes aim. The eager solemnity and pataphysical pronouncements that often accompany the architectural project are certainly the material of comedy, but architects are perhaps what Rabelais called “non-laughers.”

The theories of comedy are familiar and complementary. Bergson, Ryle or Bateson, for example, portray laughter and jokes as inversions, correctives, or sudden breaks with continuity and fashion. Comedy topples the latest epistemological constructs and replaces them with the pleasures of changing and of exposing rigidity. Laughter is a series of contingencies, an exaggeration, an accident, or an extreme within a larger context. A good joke often disarms our abstract constructs, occasionally not by direct address, but by tinkering with their wiring or with the epistemological constructs that make them possible. Comedy has no long-term intentions but instead recognizes the power of adjusting relationships and timing within a larger organization. Because of this power, theories of comedy often address the very species of systemic site that is so powerful today. Comedy models perhaps expose thesites where these for-
mats are more easily punctured. Rarely intended as anything but the temporary disruption of orthodoxy, comedy models must be constantly refashioned to critically engage the changing contents of culture. A comedian is a cultural practitioner whose ambition is not to be the author of orthodoxies but of irritants. The architect-as-comedian is not a hero in a hierarchical, “atelier” culture, but a faster-moving, more pertinent, self-evident practitioner who is perhaps attracted to those larger cultural organizations that actually direct most of the space-making in America and around the world.

Some retail formats exist as a result of not only the occasional accident or illogical detail in commerce, but as the result of a steady stream of such accidents. High volumes of production offer increasingly inexpensive goods. Errors in this high volume production can be enormous, and they tease the idea that with an increasing volume of goods, some of them might essentially be free. Certain marginal stores thrive on an even more exaggerated form of error – the overruns and seconds that the system discards, items whose existence exposes and undermines the effectiveness of the system. These stores are something like a working museum of mistakes, where rubber bath mats and black-eyed peas and bins of alarm clocks are displayed next to each other. All the items are removed from the hierarchies and indices that determine their monetary value. These stores are beautiful, almost imaginary places, places one wishes to show to Thorstein Veblen, strolling down the aisles holding a copy of The Engineers and the Price System. They are rooms full of the wild cards and jokes in the system, which generate their own peculiar currency.

Though not greatly significant to the larger economy, these stores somehow represent the possibility of puncturing a system of spatial production by treating its procedural parameters and financial limits as part of the site. This special research, perhaps now critical to any practice, need not be for the purpose of ameliorating the aesthetics of a system, or for becoming an expert in financial protocols. This only leads to the familiar image of the architect as technocrat or aesthete. Rather, this research may be more about an irreverent and opportunist process of indexing, cross-referencing, and identifying partial adjustments to global spatial formats – inventions whose results are not entirely predictable. This imaginative research may now be as important as any affiliations designed to lead us to money, or any encouragements to respect or decry the slippery values of the marketplace. Indeed, these slippery values may be the perfect opening for a comedian.