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***Supercritical
Retrospective:
Architecture,
a Matter of
Words***

Book Review

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Reviews

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to investigate the first of a series of texts examining the contemporary importance of architecture words juxtaposed to our visually saturated environment. This subject essay revisits and articulates the significance of words and their enduring relevance that differentiates architecture from empty form and meaningless fabrications.

Architecture isn't restricted solely to its visible form but extends beyond the physical building, participating in cultural production. Architecture creates a context for us to think. Architecture differentiates itself from construction through its ideas, not necessarily through constructed form. Architecture words are a matter of mind and meaning inherent to spatial significance, this differentiation being critical to the discipline of architecture and its discourse.

Architecture's semiosis, independent of any particular movement or style, communicates meaning and provides context for critical thought. The historic investigation of architectural thinking and cultural production of architecture and its discourse leads us back to a text, so that the language of architecture contains information and ideas caused and authored by an architect. An architecture void of meaning, an empty construct that fails to participate in cultural production, threatens random assemblies and meaningless forms. Architecture ideas and words remain relevant in the making of architecture. Architecture words form content and score a narrative for a meaningful architecture.

Keywords

architecture, architecture words, critical architecture, semiosis

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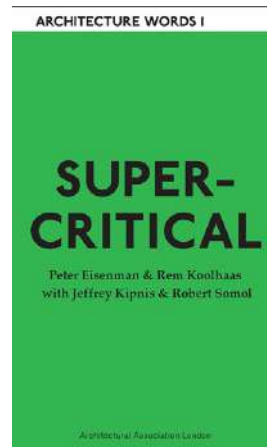


Figure 1. Architecture Words 1: Supercritical (London: Architectural Association, 2013)

“Project Architecture Words” is a series of texts and significant essays written by architects, critics and scholars. Our current culture and contemporary architecture is dominated by an overwhelming plethora of produced images, graphics and information consumption. *Supercritical* is one of a series of small books that attempts to deflect and respond to society’s visual fetish by means of direct language, concise editing and laconic design. The purpose of this series is to promote architecture and present particular ideas (thoughts) about larger issues and communicate architectural ideas, demonstrating the resilient (sustainable) power of written ideas to promote architecture discourse, challenge and change the way architects think about the discipline. As Brett Steele, the editor, summarizes: “*Architecture Words...argues for something even greater: a realization that words don’t just matter but are perhaps the ultimate form of architecture matter...*” (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 119).

Supercritical, published in 2008, is a rare record of an extraordinary 2006 public discussion between two architectural thinkers, Peter Eisenman and Rem Koolhaas, held at the Architectural Association (AA) in London and moderated by Brett Steele. Both architects came to the table



Figure 2. Peter Eisenman's proposal for the Max Reinhardt Haus, Berlin (USA: Eisenman Architects, 1992)

with their own theories and critical approach to architecture practise, which remain essential and urgent for the discourse. In addition to the subject debate, *Supercritical* includes two rare transcripts of talks given by Eisenman and Koolhaas, both articulating their ideas, which later served to influence their work and many other architects.

Following the discussion, Mark Cousins moderates Jeff Kipnis and Robert Somol, two of the world's leading theorists of contemporary architecture who skilfully unpack, scrutinize and interpret Eisenman's and Koolhaas's theory and practise. Jeff Kipnis is a professor at Ohio State University Faculty of Design and Robert Somol is the director of UIC School of Architecture in Chicago. In their critique, both focus on the disciplinary and cultural aspects of their work. Somol

highlights the differences between the two and Eisenman investigates the “geometric protocol in architecture” (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 52), a sort of technological-geometric problem; for Koolhaas it is an “urban and metropolitan project and therefore the idea of the interior as a form of the city...”, or a sort of social-statistical datascape problem (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 57).

Since the mid-1970s, both architects have repeatedly visited the AA. Rem Koolhaas is a student and teacher of ‘radical pedagogy’, an emerging architect, and Peter Eisenman is a prominent architect, theorist and guest lecturer.

Figure 3. CCTV headquarters by OMA, Rem Koolhaas, Beijing (Beijing: Getty Images (photo: Dukai photographer), 2012)

Both architects are like ships passing by in the sea, each set on different trajectories. Much earlier, Eisenman travelled to Cambridge to write his dissertation, *The Formal Basis for Modern Architecture* (1963). Koolhaas left continental Europe and travelled west to New York City to observe, study and write *Delirious New York* (1978). In his quest to formulate his personal “project”, “Delirious N.Y.”, this text instantly became a classic manifesto that has influenced a generation of architects. Along the way, both architects have continued their disparate discourse of the new avantgarde.

Eisenman and Koolhaas have very different views on architecture and openly oppose each other, which makes *Supercritical* a vibrant discourse. Koolhaas, before discovering architecture as a journalist, covered the excesses of 1960s counterculture and later applied his journalistic skill of observation to architecture. Eisenman did the very opposite, retreating to Cambridge at the beginning of his career, abandoning the city and submerging himself in the collegiate rooms and halls of medieval English architecture (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 106). They approach design with divergent theories and concepts about the city and other forms of critical and cultural practice. Both are very articulate and early on in their careers understood the importance of communicating their ideas through the spoken and written word, which are the means and foundation of their investigations, practise and work. Both architects have created their own context. Steele, the editor, appropriately cites Edwin Schlossberg: “The skill of writing and the difference between writers lies in the creation of a context where other people can think” (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 106). Eisenman and Koolhaas have created their own context for architecture with words.



Eisenman and Koolhaas are not the exception in terms of words. 20th-century history verifies that architects of influence have, through words, demonstrated the significance of architectural thought and its impact on the profession; among them are Le Corbusier, likely the most influential modernist architect; Mies van der Rohe, Venturi, Aldo Rossi, and John Hejduk; and critical theoretical thinkers like R. Banham, C. Rowe and Michael Hayes. In fact, the significance of Renaissance and modernist architects is attributed to their theoretical texts and prescribed ideas *a priori* to creating the architecture they wrote about. Investigating the history and theory of the discipline reveals that architecture words matter. “Eisenman and Koolhaas propel this further and grasp almost simultaneously the potential for language – the production of texts – as a model for architecture *as text*” (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 101).



Figure 4. CCTV headquarters by OMA, Rem Koolhaas, Beijing (Rotterdam: OMA, 2012)

Brett Steele, currently dean at UCLA, considers *the matter of words* possibly the ultimate form of architecture. Architecture, the discipline, differentiates itself from mere building by its ideas and meaning external to its objective presence. John Hejduk, former dean at Cooper Union, architect, theorist and educator, developed his own poetic language and believed that architecture resists its construction and its spirit and life exist beyond its physical presence. In an interview, Hejduk comments on Eisenman’s criticism of Hejduk’s Berlin Masques exhibition project: “They are not architecture because you can’t get in them” (Maike, 2017). Hejduk dramatically asserts that Eisenman was not in a position to get into them because he did not understand them. The interiority of Hejduk’s project is about understanding the object beyond its visual

form. Hejduk’s fundamental question projects architecture’s impact beyond its physical form: “does it (architecture) affect the spirit, or doesn’t it? If it doesn’t affect the spirit, it’s building. If it affects the spirit, it’s architecture” (Maike, 2017).

Architecture isn’t restricted solely to the visible process and extends beyond building, participating in cultural production. Architecture creates a context for us to think. Architecture differentiates itself from construction through its ideas, not in manufacturing forms, implementing new technologies, creating BIM models or by pitching the green agenda. Similarly, music affects us

externally to its structure and physical elements of notation, pitch and rhythm. A composed musical score contains sonic meaning to be read, performed and heard. Music is experienced externally to the physical score and can be appreciated whether it is performed or not. Architectural ideas in the form of drawings do not necessarily require physical construction to be read and understood. Architecture words are a matter of mind and meaning inherent to the spatial significance, and this differentiation is critical to the discipline of architecture and its discourse.

Architects clearly differ in their use of language; Hejduk, by the use of poetic language through signs, symbols and emblems, writes upon the city and Eisenman by index; his drawings are 'the red thread', a trace and record of what he was thinking, the experience and spatial geometric aspects of his architecture completely different from its conceptual intent (Maike, 2017). Peter Eisenman, considering Koolhaas's Seattle library project – an architecture that displays 'content as form' – argues that his own Hamburg library proposal is the inverse that renders 'form as content' (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 9). Both projects have content but the stories behind each particular form diametrically differ.

In *Dummy Text*, Robert Somol expounds on what differentiates these architects. Eisenman explores geometric form through an investigative process concerned with structuralist forms, textual grafts and folded singularities (Somol, 1999, p. 21). Eisenman's inquiry into these matters has developed a coherent methodology to pursue two primary projects. First, Eisenman, by dismantling the 'cube', the classical modernist object, has sought to displace the architect as authoring agent. Secondly, with the liberal-humanist project he attempts to redefine context and deconstructs the static identity of place (Somol, 1999, p. 22). The singularity of the Hamburg project or the folds of Santiago de Compostela trace their own process.

The "fold is at once a thing and its process", exhibiting *form as content* (Somol, 1999, p. 21).

Victor Hugo wrote (to cite Ricardo Scofidio in *Education of an Architect*): "...dig into etymology, reach to the root of vocables, image and idea are the same word. What you call form and what you call substance are absolutely identical, one being the exterior of the other, form being substance rendered visible" (Hejduk, 1988, p. 41).

Koolhaas, abandoning notions of form, type and space playing off statistical research, "attempts to supplant design with the diagram to deliver form without beauty and function and without efficiency" (Hejduk, 1988, p. 24). Koolhaas's illusive language of diagrams stages the possibilities of content and their arrangement, as opposed to a predetermined, "tectonic vision of architecture or legible sign of construction..." (Hejduk, 1988, p. 24); rather, Koolhaas channels information and cultural scripts in the production of architecture, staging *content as form*. As Rem explains, OMA is interested in people, not humanitarian, humanist or 'nice' architectural solutions but simply in how people exist in the flows and behaviours of global culture (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 16).

Returning to the text, Jeff Kipnis summarizes the issue concisely: the architect needs a polemic or language of its own to start a body of work. Koolhaas expostulates 400 years of precedence, proposing another kind of new text that would produce "an argument about the processional section, from the ground to the *piano nobile*, and how the elevator erased all of that history" (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 71). Architecture words matter because ideas about architecture are predicated on words and manifest themselves uniquely in the language of architecture.

“The critical and conceptual architecture of Eisenman and Koolhaas coincides with the ‘linguistic turn’ in contemporary culture: the arrival of language as a dominant model not only for the production of culture but also for describing its theories” (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 100). Words contain information and transmit meaning like DNA code, similar to machine code that communicates instructions at the molecular level that fold amino acids into three dimensional shapes, protein structures, and task-driven machines, enabling biological forms and life itself (Meyer, 2009, p. 92). DNA, the chemical language, instructs and produces 3D forms and generates life, as today’s scientific evidence supports.

Architecture’s semiosis, independent of genre, communicates meaning and provides context for critical thought. The historical investigation and cultural production of architecture and its discourse leads us back to *a text*, so that the language of architecture contains information and ideas caused and authored by an architect. An architecture void of meaning, an empty construct that fails to participate in cultural production, threatens random assemblies and meaningless forms.

Fourteen years have passed, the discourse continues, ideas and architecture words remain relevant in the making of architecture; to cite Steele: “a critical practise in architecture gives equivalence to these two things: activities associated with the making of projects and architecture’s unique form of critique. The key relationship between these things is understood to be one of shared proximity, not apparent causality” (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. 102). Theory, text and architecture discourse does not necessarily cause or result in the way we experience or understand architecture, though they inhabit the same space.

Words form content and score a narrative for a meaningful architecture. “Project Architecture Words”, through a series of books, further promotes the discourse and investigations into the matter of words: “...architectural words, more than ever, retain the gravitational capacity to form, shape and bend architectural minds” (Eisenman and Koolhaas, 2010, p. i).

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Figure 5. Seattle Central Library by OMA and Rem Koolhaas, Seattle (Rotterdam: OMA (photo: Philippe Ruault), 2004)

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