

Global After 9.11...

What is an Event and What is its Duration

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On September 25 at a convocation of New York architects in the Great Hall at Cooper Union, my colleague, Michael Sorkin concluded his remarks about the tragedy of September 11 by stating the following:

“We've been hearing for years about architecture as event space. Here is an event. What now?”

As an architect and educator, I felt the sharpness of Sorkin's point. It cuts in two ways. Firstly, of course, it refers to the architectural academy's interest in the contribution of European critical theory and philosophy, post-1968 - or what Jacques Derrida referred to as “*that event one still does not know how to name other than by its date.*” This interest on the part of the academy was/is most typically motivated by Foucault's “*events in thought*” - those disjunctive “singularities” that can neither be explained nor predicted by the normative logic of their social context and which forever thereafter must necessarily change that very same context. Sometimes per Deleuze's early interest in Foucault - and I think here is what Sorkin held in mind - it is the **event** of the spectacular, the spectacle, which compels our way of thinking about architecture both in relation to space and program - who here in the past decade has not attended a review without having crossed paths with this reference?

However, when Sorkin says, “...*Here is an event. What now?...*”, he seems to be referring to something quite different. He is adopting the plain-speak of so many who don't have a clue about post-modernist or post-structuralist thought but who think of an event in terms of Webster's marvelously dead-pan and understated definition: “a happening or occurrence,...esp. when important.”

There is irony here, of course. Sorkin has conflated both notions of the “event” and, in so doing has elevated Webster to a proper level of urgency and immediacy while hauling the architecture academy down to pay attention.

His point here, and I will take it as mine as well, is not an anti-intellectual one. To dismiss the critical and important work that has been done in the architecture schools and elsewhere over the years would be to ignore an extraordinary intellectual development that has informed not only theoretical practice but material practice as well. Most important in this development, in my judgment, has been a more relaxed understanding of truth and objectivity. This loosening up of ontological perspective has helped us to focus on what the post-modern historian Patrick Joyce has called the “capacious and greatly stimulating assemblage of ideas about such things as the nature of identity, the significance of representation, the production of knowledge, and the nature of social life.” Indeed, it is this latter interest in the nature of social life that has had a remarkable

influence on the direction of architecture programs everywhere. Read any academic catalogue or website and you will find some reference to architecture as social practice.

Now, architecture's stated involvement with social agendas is certainly nothing new at least since the advent of humanist secular thought. It has taken many forms from Ledoux & Bouleé to Gropius & Meyer to Debord & the Situationists, etc., etc. However, there are perhaps a couple of things which differentiate our current preoccupation with sociality from that of our predecessors.

Firstly, there is the absence of the utopian motive coupled with - indeed to some degree produced by - a sharpened awareness of the contingency of historical events. Absolutism and Universalism with their teleological promise of an ideal state of affairs no longer appear to hold much currency except perhaps in one's religious life. But that, as it should be, is a private affair and if there is anyone here who disagrees with this point, my comments will be a waste of your time and I would only remind you as you leave of Mr. Bin Laden's worldview.

But there is another difference in our present thinking about social space and it, as well, relates to revised thinking about history. In this case, I speak less of historical events than the actors involved and the cultural configurations in which they perform. The rise of cultural history propelled by anthropology, social geography, and critical theory has helped us to understand and appreciate the complexities of social life and welfare while steering us away from reductive social solutions driven, for example, by libertarian appeals to natural or individual rights or neo-Marxist calls for capital and communal reformation, to name a popular few. Today to speak of the social is to speak of the cultural. And to speak of cultures today is to speak of globalism.

Now..., before I go any further, I want to state, unequivocally, that this is not simply another diatribe about multi-culturalism. Indeed, I don't even know if I understand what this term means except as the shibboleth for the politically-correct. The latter being a somewhat irritating but perhaps necessary product of postmodern politics. Indeed, I am not a relativist and I don't think all cultures are equal in a world that is struggling with the idea that freedom might be a useful value to hold. However, it seems clear to me that for architecture to make social space, one needs to understand that there are culturally produced communities which have past histories, present social practices, and intentions for a future.

This is what "*Global after 9.11*" means to me. More important, it is what globalism in its most fundamental and, I think, provocative sense has always charged us with. Too much attention in academic architectural thought about globalism has been directed toward either the techniques that facilitate the globalist phenomenon or toward the brave new worlds these techniques might portend. Furthermore, these two tendencies, as one might expect, are typically expressed in the same celebratory vocabulary describing digitized informatics, condensed or hyper time-space, virtual sociality, Being as network, etc., etc.

This limited focus on globalism has produced some graduate students who are interesting designers and fictionalists but who also have very little sense of history or deep time.

To think of globalism without being provoked by the fascinating and critically important understanding of diverse human histories and cultural formations is to overlook ourselves. But again, I want to appeal to your intellectual aspirations rather than harangue you for your personal politics. This is not a call to ethics nor am I invoking moral imperatives...these kinds of things are based on other kinds of decisions we all must invariably make in private. No, my concern is more simple. The more things we know, the more things we can draw upon to provoke our imaginations. And one of the things we have always tried to imagine, even now in the absence of utopian schemes, are ways to make human experience more rich in its expression, more interesting in its endeavors, and more just in its social practices.

II

At this point, I should applaud your patience in staring at these two slides for so long without my explaining them. Maybe I don't need to. Nonetheless, here goes. The left slide (*see below*) shows a detail of a project my office completed a few years back. It's from a roof-top writing studio whose fenestration attempted to formally iterate the distant content of its frame and collapse or re-configure that mediatory space between the thing viewed and the viewer. Simple idea about people and things in space. The slide on the right (*see below*) is a simple idea about people and things in time. It shows a diagram adapted from Edmund Husserl by Merleau-Ponty. Husserl, as I'm sure many of you know, was the philosopher of modern phenomenology and who inspired a host of European philosophers who came after. Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Sartre. All of whom, including Husserl, became the targets of the next generation... Derrida, Foucault, Habermas, Deleuze and others who have become fundamental in architecture's household of academic theory. Parenthetically, I should note that my reading of philosophy is selective and some of you may have detected the air of American pragmatism in much of this. Good for you. I am very fond of the smell myself.

In any case, Merleau-Ponty's diagram strikes me as a useful tool to illustrate this simple idea about people and things in time. Read the horizontal line as points in present time, the vertical lines as points related to past time and the oblique lines as points related to the future. I am going to describe the dynamic of the diagram in quotes from Jean-Francois Lyotard who first drew my attention to it.

Time is not a line but a network of intentionalities. When I slide from A to B, I keep hold of A through A' and beyond... We must still note that when B becomes C, B also becomes B', and that simultaneously A, already fallen into A', falls into A''. In other words, my time moves as a whole. What is to come, which I grasp at first only through opaque shadings (the oblique dashed lines), comes to pass in person for me; C2 descends into C1, then gives itself in C in my field of presence, and even as I meditate on this presence C traces itself out for me as "no longer", for now my presence is in D.

In other words, my time moves as a whole...The present is not closed but always transcends itself toward a future and a past.

This is what I mean about deep time and a sense of history. Looking deeply in both directions.

III

I have, so far, kept September 11th somewhat at bay. I am glossing the usual rhetoric about our country's extraordinary blunders in not anticipating what now seems to be the inevitability of an event like this but I hope my remarks above convey that I share this belief about our country's mistakes. Nevertheless, as a committed believer in constitutional democracy, I view our short-sighted geopolitics, cultural hegemony, and utterly transparent double standards not as stemming from a necessarily abusive logic of late capitalism nor insidious interest in cultural imperialism. Rather our behavior reflects the over grasping naiveté of a well-meaning but awkward nation-state too giddy with its own remarkable successes on the global stage to understand its growing responsibilities in global affairs.

As many of you know, I had a particularly bad day on Sept 11th having lost my home of over 20 years as well as my office next door when Tower 2 came down. I spoke about this day, along with Michael Sorkin, and others in the Great Hall at Cooper Union. I spoke about my family's escape and the confusion we felt running away. I quote from it here :

“North and West would take us deeper into the towers’ shadows; North and East lay City Hall; South was toward Battery Park, Federal landmarks, the Statue of Liberty; due East, the NY Stock exchange and Federal Hall. It was a confusing moment when we believed not that the towers would collapse but that we might be experiencing a sustained attack on specific targets. To run in any direction - it seemed to me - was to find oneself situated within a space suddenly highly charged; a luminescence rung by the material and memorial fabric of our history, our city, our nation, and our international identity.”
...end quote.

I concluded my talk with a deferral about the future of the WTC site as follows:

Quote...*“When they were first built, the World Trade Towers were remarkable for the cleavage they cut through architecture culture - a duel, so to speak, between those architects who hated them and those who loved them. It was a healthy discussion at the time and raised a number of important stylistic, urban, and political issues that still lurk in urban discourse today. But in the past 30 years or so, these towers acquired something far more complex than any of us could have imagined then. I think of my three young children who were born and raised in the reflected light of those towers. I think about teaching each of them what to do if they ever became lost in the city and it was always with a sense of pride and proprietary right that I would say...”just look up, kids, and head for the towers, that’s where home is.”*

Unlike the official government landmarks I avoided two weeks ago, the towers had played to a larger imagination. This, sadly, has been made abundantly clear. There seems to be a kind of super-condensed speed to their history now...there and gone...leaving an unfulfilled absence around which we are all now searching for our bearings. I hope we will find them again. That is all I am sure of so far.”...end quote.

My point was to note both architectural spacing and the fluidity of meaning through time and cultural experience...how the conflation of architectural space and meaning directed my escape and how my sense of who I was as a historical being in time was partially constituted by the architecture out my window. Finally, I was referring to the extraordinary symbolic force that the Towers held - a force that both directed the attack from those who saw them as epitomizing an antagonistic and self-satisfied culture and, on the other hand, that now directs the mourning of a proud and progressivist nation that has trouble understanding why others might resist the way of life they exemplified.

If Foucault is correct in believing that “events in thought” *structure* the human project, and I, for one, think that he is correct here, then we are using this foundational architectural term to mean that we are constantly constructing ourselves through time and that architecture is “always already” implicated. Furthermore, the sociality that is being produced in this moment stands at the advent of globalism and its actual formation is still beyond our visible horizon.

Yet, I am also suggesting that to think of an event, in its most meaningful sense, either as a Foucauldian singularity or a Websterian “occurrence” is not useful. Events may seem to emerge illogically like epi-phenomenon from within a given cultural context but they do have a history and portensions for a future. To not understand this is to ignore deep time as our, otherwise remarkable, democracy has often done and to find ourselves poorly poised in confronting the social space of globalism.

Events, besides having effects, have duration. When the Event of September 11 is over, which is to say when history brackets it for reflective purposes, we will all know better how to speak of it. In the meantime, when we speak of globalism to our students, we must remind them that techniques and brave new worlds carry responsibilities. The least of which is to imagine how our spatial configurations and their social effects might make the human experience more rich, interesting, and just.



LEFT IMAGE

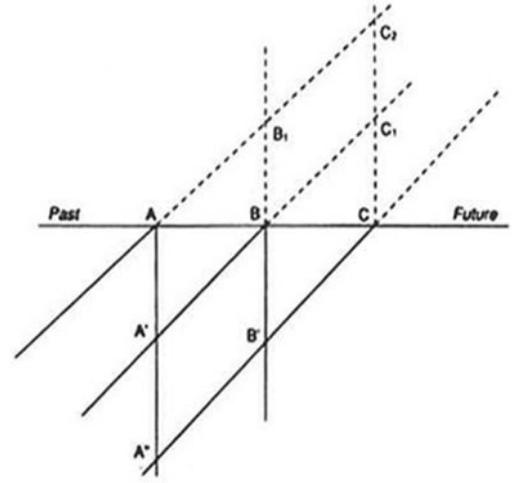


Figure 2

RIGHT IMAGE