

## City Speculations

How would one speculate on a city? Specifically, how would one speculate on a city so freighted with prejudices as Florence? The Edinburgh MArch Programme 2008-10, *Florence: Curating the City* engaged in and with such a challenging speculation. What then is curation, insofar as it pertains to the city and to speculation?

I have posited in *Cura* (collected in *Curating Architecture and the City*, eds S Chaplin and A Stara, Routledge, 2009) an Ideational structure to the question of curation, relating it, via Seneca's last letter, to the question of *care*. As he says:

The good of the one, namely God, is fulfilled by his nature; but that of the other, man, is fulfilled by care (*cura* in Latin)

In that essay, I followed this thought through Heidegger's notion of *sorge* (care) and the *situational* nature of architecture, situation here being taken in the sense Sartre gives it in *Being and Nothingness* ("the situation is a *relation of being* between a for-itself and the in-itself which the for-itself nihilates"), within the context of what Deleuze in an early essay characterises as an irreducible life. Architecture showed itself to be liturgical, not in a theological sense, but rather returning to the root of the word - a "people-work" (Greek: *leit-ergon*).

Here, since it is a question of *speculation*, let us take another route, this time via Kant, the father of speculative philosophy. (To speak simply, we can place speculative philosophy opposite the empiricism of that great Edinburgher, David Hume, and the analytic tradition of philosophy flowing in good part from him; not forgetting, however, that Kant credits Hume with wakening him from his "dogmatic slumbers".) At the heart of Kant's first critique lies his table of categories (B106) which as Badiou points out in a short essay (*Kant's Subtractive Ontology*, in *Badiou: Theoretical Writings*; Continuum, 2004) is nothing other than "a veritable catalogue of every conceivable type of relation." Now it is notable that within this table, the relation of cause and effect - which because of its scientific/technical applicability is somewhat hegemonic in its influence, including over architecture - is picked out by Kant for explanation. He gives an odd example in order to explain its significance.

The example is the relationship between God, as creator; and the world, as that which he has created. The relationship between God and the world is an example says Kant, of the relationship of *cause and effect*. Why is this? The reason is that there is a movement in only one direction in this relationship, the direction *from cause to effect*. The cause acts to produce the effect, but *not* the other way around. God (should there be such) is that which is sufficient unto itself, not needful of any outside aid. As Seneca says, he is of the type that is fulfilled by his own nature. Therefore, in the relationship with the world there is no reciprocal or reflexive relationship back from the world to God. The world does not influence (act as a cause upon) God; by nature, he is outside its ambit. Therefore, the relationship between these two is one of cause (God) and effect (world).

(We leave to one side the question as to whether this is really an "example" of cause and effect. It is on the face of it odd to use God (the unique) as an "example". What other "example" of cause and effect could Kant have given? Give the subsequent reliance upon this relation, we find this question implicit in certain critical problems down to the present day - quantum mechanics, the ethics and techniques of medical research, relativity, economics...)

As with any cohort of contemporaries, the MArch work I had the pleasure to critique in March 2009 varied in quality. All the projects seemed to me united by a common concern for the *process* of architectural creation. Coming - as did one of my fellow critics (Graeme Hutton, Dean at Dundee) - from a more tectonic and builderly tradition of architectural education which tends to dismiss this approach as "process work", I recall expressing some skepticism. Is this approach to architectural design not too *speculative*, one might ask? My concern was

that in disengaging architectural design so far from the builderly (in Frampton's tectonic sense) and culturally situated (in the hermeneutic sense, again championed by Frampton in his essays on critical regionalism) approach characteristic of the schools I am familiar with (for instance, Kingston, where I teach; or London Metropolitan); in working instead through a somewhat disengaged and abstract creative process deriving (it seemed to me) at least in part from some of Eisenman's 1980's projects - I am thinking of the exquisite box *Moving Arrows Eros and other Errors* for instance, a project also situated in an intensely historic/romantic Italian city (Verona, in that case) - to create what were often formally beautiful and (in terms of a self-consistent process) justifiable (if not justified) propositions; and in then juxtaposing or imposing these propositions on the city fabric of Florence; - my concern was whether these architectural designs did not indeed remain abstract and somewhat reductive in what would be their *effect*.

In other words, was the disengagement I perceived not that characteristic of the relation of cause and effect? Was the creative movement in one direction only (*from* the process *to* the proposition)? Is architectural creation in fact to be modeled on the act of the "creative" God?

In the best MArch work, precisely not. And this surprised me - by which I mean to say that I learnt something. (Students perhaps have the illusion that they are learning from their tutors. The truth is the opposite.) The better work (as does the better work everywhere) forewent the easy hegemonic relation of *cause and effect* in the name of something akin to what Kant names the relation of *Community* - that is, as he says, the disjunctive relation of a *reciprocity between agent and patient*, which he carefully opposes to that of cause and effect. In this context this meant that a to-and-fro relationship was set up, within the design "process" (which thereby became something more than a mere process, a mere production), between the abstract speculative element and this extraordinary city, perceived as a lived and historic phenomena. This openness and reciprocal activity could be sensed within the best MArch work, and resulted in some pieces whose beauty was more than merely formal. Could it be a co-incidence that the reciprocity evident in the creative process resulted in proposals which, in fostering - it seemed to me - a reciprocity between the person and the place, were also true to what I called above the *liturgical* ontology of architecture (ie its being as a "people-work")?

But a strong architecture is not determined merely by an attention to the reciprocity of Kant's relation of Community, indispensable though this is. (Eisenman's avoidance of this relation in both his exhaustively documented creative process, and in his ontology of architecture, is his fundamental weakness and the reason why his work is indeed as formal as he says it is.) Alongside this - since I believe that the being of architecture is not *one*, but is multifarious - the strength of this MArch work lies ultimately as much in the manner in which the speculative issues remain in play, a ploy which gives the architecture an *Ideational* quality (to return to a word I used at the outset). And I mean this in the Deleuzian sense of the Idea; an architecture which operates on us "by posing the question of its own difference" (Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition*, p195) - and which therefore acts as a generator (not follower) of concepts.

That this speculative strength rang convincingly through work which at times also evinced a reciprocal and open creativity, and an implicit awareness of the liturgical status of architecture - yes, this was a surprise; a surprise for which thanks is due.

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