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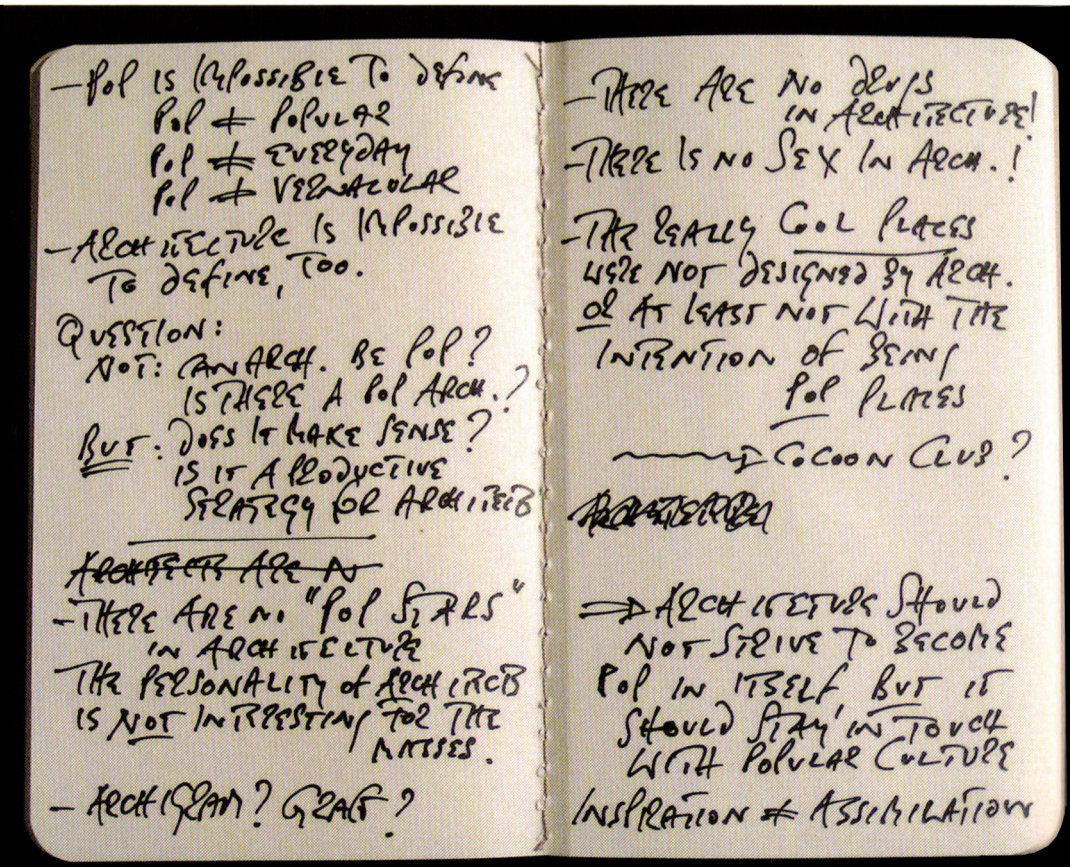
INTERROGATING POP IN ARCHITECTURE

COME PLAY WITH ME – IN SEARCH OF POP(ULARITY)

Riklef Rambow – in conversation with Daniela Konrad and Jason Danziger

Riklef Rambow talks about his definition of the cultural phenomenon POP linked to sex, drugs, and rock and roll, youth and stardom. Referring to POP art and POP music he lifts the lid on a series of characteristics of POP and their uneasy relationship to architecture.

RR Riklef Rambow
DK Daniela Konrad
JD Jason Danziger



RR. According to your statement, I seem to be referring to an old-fashioned, naïve idea of POP But I am not sure if it still makes sense to talk about POP if you refer to TV shows like "POPstars, organized by old, boring guys, produced and promoted by the media system, lacking any kind of subversive moment or potential. So if you say that today Dieter Bohlen, Rupert Murdoch or Hubert Burda are the real POP stars, than you can indeed deny any serious relationship between youth and POP. But, contrary to this position, I would hold on to the idea that our society still allows young people to express themselves through POP in certain niches. For example, techno music was started by young people and for a while worked as a POP movement in this emphatic sense, before it was absorbed by the music industry for "big business" purposes. In this sense subversive movements are still possible. And even provocation can be expressed to a certain degree. But let us return to architecture. I would like to add that here you can form a group and start undermining conventions as well. Archigram is an example for such an approach. The medium they chose for their designs was paper. So their ideas got distributed right away and didn't suffer from that long development and construction process.

In this sense, if we talk about designing and publishing ideas in a magazine, it is indeed possible to work directly with POP ideas in architecture.

But then again, Archigram's work is probably closer to art than to architecture. Once the group or their remaining members are actually producing a building, with the Kunsthaus in Graz by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier, almost 40 years have passed, and the building differs substantially from the visions formulated by Archigram in the first place.

DK. Mentioning Archigram, I would like to know if your definition of POP in architecture is linked to utopian ideas. Can the designs of the '60s by Archigram be described as POP architecture?

RR. Maybe POP does not have to do with utopian ideas, but rather with irrational or counter-rational ideas: ideas boiling with energy that do not necessarily make sense but are developed just for the sake of it. This phenomenon actually contradicts architecture. In architecture, producing a building that really does not make sense, a building that is purely flamboyant, an orgy, or a built folly, is ultimately a question of money. It might be helpful to think of Versailles or Neuschwanstein, which exemplify the rare combination of absolute power and visions of grandeur. Fortunately, there are not many people who have either enough money or the desire to actually make such buildings materialize.

JD. Can you be more precise? You said that POP is always fun. So can we assume that if architecture is fun, then it is POP? mean, buildings like Versailles or Neuschwanstein are in my opinion fun, but they are, as you mentioned, relatively rare. Most of the architecture that is constructed needs to take more responsibility and provide homes for people or venues for social events.

RR. Yes, the fun aspect is only one possible way of approaching the POP phenomenon in architecture. But there is no general definition saying that if architecture is fun then it is POP, because POP is fun. POP is always about a combination of factors. There is not one pure and straightforward definition of POP. I want to emphasize that POP is definitely a fuzzy concept. I can easily agree on the fact that architecture has certain sensitivity towards POP culture or relationship with it. And iconographic architecture is representing a part of a POP movement. When architecture appears in movies and advertisements, the wider public can be affected by its emotional power. In this case, buildings might work as images for a popular lifestyle. That is one example of a relationship between POP and architecture, and it is possible to show that they in fact can profit from

each other. But again, that does not mean that there is a POP architecture per se. Otherwise you would have to admit that Friedensreich Hundertwasser is the closest you ever get to a POP architect. He has produced buildings with flashy aspects like golden domes that many people understand emotionally. Picture calendars and posters of his work are mass produced, and these you may indeed find in the rooms of 14 year old suburban adolescents.

DK. That is a very important point in the discussion on POP in architecture that you are mentioning. Hundertwasser in fact is not a major reference for architects, and he is often criticized within the profession. But after the Modern Movement, the Bauhaus period and the minimalist and brutalist architecture, which didn't offer the general public the possibility of feeling comfortable or understood, I think we can detect a POP movement in architecture which has resulted in more popular buildings by avant-garde architects, meaning architects who are admired and respected within contemporary architectural circles. And as a matter of fact, these buildings are still offering opposition to Hundertwasser's direction. What seems crucial to me is that this new POP phenomenon has actually led to the fact that many architects want to jump on the POP bandwagon and produce iconographic buildings with mass appeal: buildings that replace the architecture by Friedensreich Hundertwasser and are able to influence professional architectural discourse. Today, the "form follows function" has been replaced by a discourse about "popular visualization.

In Barceloneta, Barcelona, Spain

RR. You have to differentiate between popularity and POP I tried to highlight this aspect in the title of my lecture "Come Play with Me in Search of POP(ularity). The orientation of architects towards popularity, the wish to be loved by ordinary people, is related to populism, but not to POP

JD. During your lecture you said that architecture does not produce strong emotions. You quoted Umberto Eco and said that architecture is mostly background for emotions but does not provoke them. I think we can agree that emotions do play a part in POP culture. Some architects and designers, like Philippe Starck or Steven Holl, have built their careers on creating highly charged emotional spaces. And, there is a long tradition in literature (i.e., Marcel Proust and W. G. Sebald) who use architecture as a direct metaphor for emotions and who actually forge emotional "spaces.

I would like to know your thoughts about the following quote from Sebald's book *Austerlitz* (2001): "Until the 17th century the priory of the order of the Saint Mary of Bethlehem stood on the site of the present main station concourse and the Great Eastern Hotel. It had been founded by a certain Simon Fits Mary in gratitude for his miraculous rescue (...).

A madeleine

Whenever I was in the station, Austerlitz said, I kept almost obsessively trying to imagine through the ever changing mains of walls the location in that huge space of the rooms where the in-silent inmates where confined. And I often wondered whether the pain and suffering accumulated on this site over the centuries had ever really ebbed away, or whether they might not still, as I sometimes thought when I felt the cold breath of air on my forehead, be sensed as we passed through them on our way through the station hall and up and down the flights of steps.

RR. Sebald is definitely not POP. He rather represents the opposite of POP and stands firmly on the grounds of an intellectual high culture. His thinking about the relationship between built structure and emotion is highly refined and subtle, his language very artful and elaborated. The same goes for Marcel Proust and the story of the madeleine. There, just the smell of the madeleine, a small cake, helps to reveal an entire world. Proust is starting a story from a seemingly small sensual experience and develops it throughout thousands of pages. Sure, architecture plays a role here and it functions as a starting point for remembrances and emotions, but in the most elaborated and artificial way.

So I can agree that buildings are part of our memories and are able to activate emotions, but I would nevertheless insistently oppose the idea that architecture raises strong emotions in the same way that POP is raising emotions, meaning in a direct unfiltered way. If you are sixteen years old and you have fallen in love with a girl, and your love is not returned, and you are losing your faith in this world, you feel you have to do something! Maybe you sit down and write a poem, or you make a collage, or write a piece of music, or you go to a concert, or watch some video-clip on MTV. And then you discover that somebody exactly expresses these same feelings in a song, and this song becomes "your" song. You will always remember the girl you have been in love with when somebody is playing it. Something like this usually does not happen with a piece of architecture.

JD. It is interesting to understand the madeleine as a mechanism, which functions, as you said, because it recalls emotions from another place. It might be called an "emotional displacement mechanism. And I think that POP often operates using this kind of mechanism (your example of the teenager who has strong emotions finding solace in the POP song which helps him/her cope). True, I am not a psychologist, but I do think that the madeleine, as a mechanism, operates quite strongly in architecture, too. As an example we could look at the Holocaust Memorial by Richard Serra and Peter Eisenman. This monument operates in the same way as the madeleine: it can provoke an emotional response and clarify a certain approach to a very difficult episode in history.

RR. Yes, there obviously has been the idea to build a monument which raises certain emotions. The Holocaust Memorial has the problem that it is meant to generate specific emotions and at the same time it has to avoid the impression of being too didactic. You find this ambiguity throughout all of Peter Eisenman's statements and you find it at the site itself, because many people obviously use it as a place where they have fun, play hide and seek, or make interesting photographs. Many tourists have not the slightest clue what it is meant for. Hardly anyone seems to experience moments of alienation or loneliness.

Interestingly enough, the *Ort der Information*, the relatively small museum beneath the memorial that was added later to the design, seems to be much more effective than the memorial itself in terms of emotional power. Maybe it's a bit of an exaggeration, but after all, a photograph of the concentration camps or some original document or leftover behind glass is emotionally much stronger and more precise than this huge architectural object that costs millions of Euros. In an article called *Grenzen der Entgrenzung: Architektur, Musik, Drogen* my co-author and I try to show that the possibility that architecture alone can produce feelings of the transgression or dissolution of boundaries is severely limited. And it is precisely these feelings that are very important in POP culture.

Going back to the example of the teenager, he/she can experience these moments in a club by means of ecstatic dancing, intensive music, or the use of legal or illegal drugs. These strong effects that you might experience in a club you cannot produce with architecture. In fact, the best clubs are often spaces that are either not designed at all or not designed by architects. In my lecture I referred to the Cocoon Club in Frankfurt, a very elaborately designed techno club. It is a nice space, but you really don't need all the effort for the intended emotional effect.

Buildings, even if they strive to raise emotions, remain products of an intellectual and technical process that is much more subtle and restrained.

You can become ecstatic by dancing in a very simple, improvised, and undesigned environment. To summarize, think architecture has surely lots of qualities, but the ability to produce those in-the-face emotions that POP culture is requiring, is not one of the most obvious among them.

DK. I want to raise the question of whether we need to put architecture into another category and discuss it on another level than music or art. To more precisely describe my point, I want to give an example: a piece of POP music, let's say a song by Madonna, might as well provoke a happy and ecstatic feeling as unhappy and mournful emotions. And the expression of both kinds of emotions is generally accepted in the world of music. But if a building provokes sad and plaintive emotions, for example schools in the United States that are built to be re-used as prisons, these kinds of buildings are neither considered elaborated architecture nor POP architecture.

architecture does in fact incorporate a moment of direct communication, more so than the abstract and knowledge-intensive modern buildings.

To formulate it more precisely, the criteria for evaluation of this kind of architecture are more comprehensible to the masses. But exactly this aspect is then in turn criticized as being populist among architectural experts. It does not refer to the traditional criteria developed in architectural history and theory. Therefore, iconic buildings might well be considered as a kind of architecture that transgresses the borders of the discipline and opens up possibilities of communication. The question of whether iconic architecture should be considered POP still remains.

DK. The medial presence of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao provides a reputation for architecture that is surely open to discussion, but what I am interested in is the fact that this constant name-dropping on the mass media level is changing the architectural market and opening up new possibilities for the architectural profession. Recently the ZDF broadcasted a report on Rem Koolhaas describing him as an iconic figure in architecture" and an "XXL architect. I must admit, I took delight in listening to these words, because I think it is a new phenomenon that architects are described in such slogan-like terms.

RR. I do also believe that there is a change occurring in the perception of architects and architecture. But even though there are more interviews with architects on TV, the majority of the architects, and even the "big names" as Norman Foster, Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid or Frank Gehry are still only famous among architects or architectural critics. The fact that somebody has visited the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao does not automatically mean that he or she is able to recall the name of the architect or develops an interest in her/his personality.

JD. You put your finger on a crisis in architecture. In recent decades, architects went in one direction and everybody else in the other. Architects have only rarely attempted to approach or bridge that gap. Most of them seem quite far from daily reality. In your lecture, you also mentioned that many trendy places, like bars or clubs, are not designed by architects. But I think POP could possibly offer architecture a way back into society, to reconsider the profession of the architect as a service for society. Is POP actually creating a "Coup d'État?"

DK. And yet another question is whether POP culture could initiate a new architectural approach toward building tasks like single family houses. Architects often rejected projects for the masses as being too simple. The issue here should not be to discuss POP versus populism, but the feasible chance of POP culture subverting existing power structures and allowing everybody including architects to rethink.

RR. Places for the masses unfortunately often tend to exemplify bad architecture. There are not many role-models for young architects who want to become successful by building low-key projects and still be taken seriously in the architectural scene.

Possibly, a POP approach in architecture has some potential to bridge the expert-layman gap, but POP is just one possible strategy among others.

Architecture at large is still an elitist profession, and you are probably right when you say that most architects are really far away from the daily reality of the average person. Too many architects seem to take the popular success of a building as an indicator for a lack of quality. Often that works like some sort of automatic reflex: If everybody understands it, than something must be wrong.

DK. Riklef, we want to talk about the ideas that you shared with us during your lecture at our symposium on POP architecture. You mentioned that POP has a strong relationship with sex and drugs, and that the cultural phenomenon POP produces and, in turn, is dependent on POP stars. But according to you there are neither sex, drugs nor POP stars in architecture, hardly anybody cares about the private lives of architects, and people do not display posters of architects on their walls. I wonder if we should dispense with the traditional definition of POP and admit that architecture nowadays is trying to produce icons and signs as representations of wealth and power; for example, oversized and "over-designed" houses which are more like spectacles than functional homes. Isn't it feasible that architecture could include POP aspects or even be POP?

RR. When I tried to define the term POP at the symposium, I deliberately started from a provocative point of view, saying that POP should have to do with sex, drugs, and rock and roll, which, in my eyes, is sort of a classical definition of POP culture. Additionally, the cult of the POP star is a crucial component of POP. Searching for these elements in architecture, we have to admit that architecture at the moment is not very sexy, and also architects as persons are not very sexy, generally speaking. The majority of the people wouldn't go and buy a poster of, let's say, Frank Gehry. He is definitely considered to be a POP star in the architecture scene, but I would not describe him as a POP star per se.

Furthermore, the average age of architects who build is much higher than the age of POP stars in music. And that is a problem, if you are 40 years or older and just beginning to be a famous architect, you are too old to become a POP star for the teenager generation. I want to hold on to the idea that POP culture is an important way for the younger generation to express itself in a non-predetermined way. POP culture needs to provide opportunities for subversive actions and allow for a sort of an emotional acting out. You have to admit that this is a difficult task for architecture to fulfill. Besides, not only the age of the architect but also the fact that the process of producing architecture is expensive and takes a long time plays an important role. In fact, architecture is very knowledge-intensive, meaning you really need professional education to be able to construct buildings at all. Looking at music or art, everybody can easily point out several examples of POP stars who just joined the scene and were not professionals in their fields.

So, while in other disciplines one is able to just jump in, in architecture it is not feasible to just design and build some flashy, popular building.

I do not want to deny that there are certain buildings with a potential to be POP architecture, like the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Surely this building has become part of general POP culture: It is widely known, often used as the background for fashion photography and it was even chosen as a location for a James Bond movie. But what is crucial to me is that, even if the Guggenheim Museum becomes part of POP iconography, that does not mean it is POP in and of itself.

JD. Architecture is always lagging twenty years behind other forms of creative expression. Often, when something appears in art or music it takes at least twenty years to be reflected in architecture. Two examples are minimalist art of the '60s and the minimalist architecture of the '80s. What interests me is the relationship between POP itself and today's youth. I think POP can often enable the powers that be to structure, formulate, and control public opinion. Because those in power the people driving the POP car are not young themselves, they just want to influence young people. So how can you precisely define the relationship between POP and youth?