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The Organic Approach

Deborah Gans

“Organic” is a word that one uses with hesitation. It conjures biomorphic forms confused with nature, underpinned with explorations confused with freedom and mythical analogies that overreach in its admittably humanistic goals.

Today, organic forms are seemingly present in the gorgeous folding surfaces that flow from our computers. They are accompanied by a discourse that offers their super-contingent form as a compensation for cultural rifts; they do not directly address the Organic Approach, which was a search for critical tools that could overcome mere zeitgeist representation and confront the discontinuities in our cultural fabric among classes, places, and infrastructures and their symptomatic conditions of megalopolis, ecological crises, and warfare.

The name of the conference—with “organic” as the modifier of “approach”—was very much the point, we were searching for modes of exploration rather than a model of form. As Zaha Hadid traced in the nineteenth-century German roots of this distinction, organic meant the finding of form (undivision) not the giving of it (formulation).

The invited participants offered conflicting ideas about this concept, but they returned to a common set of concerns: the problem of democracy, the problem of technology, and the problem of the city, most broadly framed as the relations of nature to culture.

The Organic and Democracy

How can organic architecture facilitate, as well as represent, aspects of democracy? Günther Bellersch described his forty-year attempt to reduce constraints and enhance freedoms through a practice he considers collaborative in its process and non-deterministic in its objects. Describing buildings made from contingencies, layers, and fragments, he simultaneously maintained the boundary position that glass can achieve the desired transparency of democratic culture: through open interior space and permeable boundaries, this glass architecture attempts to merge building with landscape or the freedom of the street. His parliament in Born (under construction for 15 years and un-
The Organic and Technology

The concept of a democratic architecture resulting from the social forces that act upon it was challenged by discussions of change and continuity within the organic object. Speakers stressed the potential of computer technology to behave organically and the digital world to serve as an organic environment.

Hareesh Lakhani showed geometric forms of increasing complexity that he generated from a digital "genetic code," provoking the question of how such virtual systems could become physical; what would be the limits and determinants be in material, scale and time? John Johnson discussed nanotechnology. William Katafotis described a chemical architecture where encoding of patterns occur on a molecular level. Both suggested that habitable structures and landscapes might literally be farmed from a single cell or crystallized from a start-up molecule. The imagined merging of the natural and artificial also appeared as the digital modeling of materials and physical forces.

Mahadev Ramani of Ove Arup, rhetorically described how the fluid mechanics of the curved Ramosi Airport (Reno Piano) and the adamantly gridded U.S. Courthouse in Houston (Richard Meier) are equally sophisticated, either through their skins or shapes, in creating their own internal weather systems. Both are "performance buildings," as Johnson put it, characterized by "self-organization, sensors and responsiveness to environment and the user."

The value of both the performance building and the democratic building depends on interaction with its physical or cultural environment. Like organisms which survive through the exchange of substances with environment, the organic object cannot exist in isolation.

Nature and Culture

In the context of the conference, the blurring of built form and landscape in large-scale environmental earthworks seems to be part of a larger desire to overcome our dialectical framing of nature and culture. While Kenneth Frampton soberly questioned the ability of organic architecture to embrace the collective assembly and physical monumentality fundamental to urbanism, a certain utopianism pervaded the conference. There were calls for freedom (nature) and for place (culture) at the scale of building, city and time and space.

The freedom of "no place" was expressed most purely in John Johansen's Event City, constructed through an ephemeral tissue of individual and collective actions, and Todd Dalid's nomadic tent city, which was infrastructure hook-ups like tree stumps in a continuous landscape. The desire to ground freedom in place appeared in Volkor Gerstek's arboretum, in recurrent references to the vernacular and in Frampton's homage to Aalto's fusion of landscape and urban density.

Ahmet Ormurtat, a mechanical engineer and philosopher of science, most precisely described the physical necessities that control the relation of nature and culture. He explained: Organizations are entities who struggle to persist (live) in the condition of scarcity of substances and time. They struggling against each and the fatal threat of indolence. The world is a fatal environment, not because it is a mediocre but because inanimate nature is insufficient and does not "care about" the complex arrangements that organisms need in order to live. One could say that organisms live in a disenfranchised environment.

While playing with the dream of an enchanted landscape, the conference searched for the insight needed to avoid the proliferation of indolence.

"The Organic Approach," a three-day symposium sponsored by Pratt Institute's School of Architecture, was held in New York City in March. It included lectures and panel discussions among architects, engineers, computer graphics designers, scientists and historians from the U.S. and abroad. The symposium was based on a seminar taught at Pratt by Nathaca Koi, and organized by Koi and Deborah Gers.