MINIMALIST PHENOMENOLOGY: BYE HOUSE & FUN PALACE
JOHN LEANO

John Hejduk's Bye House and Cedric Price's proposed Fun Palace present contrapuntal yet not necessarily dissimilar situations reflecting phenomenal experiences of minimalist art. A closer examination of specific elements in each case establishes a dialogue of qualities of minimalist art and by extension, the experience of each particular case. In Bye House, it is *unified separation* given by the phenomenal transparency of the datum wall and its function as a binding element for disparate programs. In the Fun Palace it is *disordered unification* given by separate static modules bound by a dynamic, literally transparent structure. A balance of minimalist experiential output is observed by both projects through theatricality, or autonomous recognitions, and temporality, a necessary prerequisite for theatre. Essentially, transparency in conjunction with theatre and its temporal requirement becomes a basis for the experience of the following cases in much the same way as the experience surrounding minimalist painting and sculpture.

A phenomenal transparency becomes apparent when examining the effect on an observer of one of Hejduk's "first principles", a traditional architectural element, the wall. The House's datum wall makes two important distinctions in lieu of its dominating scale and austerity. The first is an acknowledgement of boundary or the separation of program from circulation. "Life has to do with walls... the thing we're always transgressing..." An established continuity by unifying discontinuous modules alludes to the effect that minimalist sculpture has on its beholder – a phenomenon dependent on timelessness, and therefore demanding movement rather than static observation from its beholder, which also recognizes the theatrical quality of sculpture-beholder autonomy. In the House, spiral circulation through the datum simulates an infinite experience, monotonous repetition while moving from program to program. Despite its literal boundary, the datum becomes phenomenally transparent in its failure to delineate a dynamic boundary or a case in which the experience of movement within would be "finite", such as in a corridor which requires static moments in time to experience disparate programs.

The second distinction is functional clarity. Aside from its scalar domination among its adjacent modules, the use of color on non-circulation modules not only reinforces the separation of program but broadly distinguishes circulation from program. Additionally, color enables a more pictorial reading of the building as a whole, but precedes in priority the scalar dominance of the datum and thereby distributes the phenomenal experience from experiencing (circulating) to simply reading the datum as a type of frame - a border in the pictorial sense. The act of reading the House, like reading a minimalist painting, becomes dependent on its border – a type of phenomenal transparency

which effectively allows the beholder to see through imagery to pure form. In essence, the wall obscures itself in simply being a building element as functional as any of the curvilinear volumes – the other shapes on the canvas - while also clearly remaining a foundational or functional element in itself. Consequently, as a defining element of the House the datum unifies while separates on the basis of phenomenal effects initially apparent in the experience of minimalist art. Different ways of experiencing or reading are accomplished by identifying the datum as theatre, as frame or building as painting.

While the House was Hejduk's attempt at reinterpreting the traditional configuration of a house, Price's Palace was an experiment in *reconfiguring* a house (or palace). The basis of the Palace experience rests on continual disassembly and reassembly – a continually discontinuous experience as in the House – of modular elements which comprise programs. Activity spaces, or more generally volumetric function, become dynamic along a mechanical and structural framework, as opposed to one-off spaces adjacent to the stationary datum in the House. Structure is variable while program is mapped to various modules, and circulation is reduced in priority to a means rather than a focus. In this case, the flexibility of space is what *houses* action, rather than demands it as in the datum's situation. Disordered unification is then achieved by a dynamic and static tandem. The Palace's unenclosed steel structure, in contrast with prefabricated modules, suggests a literal transparency in accordance with a dynamic, changing system of separate programs. Much like the datum the experience of disparate programs depends on the timeless theatricality of a unifying element; however, unlike the datum, the Palace embeds action or activity in structure and technology rather than proposes or demands it in a singular relatively static element. The intention therefore implies passivity of the beholder while the structure creates action by acting. As in minimalist sculpture, the setting emphasizes timelessness through repetitive activity – configuration and reconfiguration, a constant shuffling of modules. In this way, the Palace becomes literally transparent by necessitating a recognition of itself or its program allowing its dynamism to actively invite the occupant as opposed to forcing a choice. Put simply, the beholder is given a flexibility of choice or control, as in the observation of minimalist sculpture which pushes a practically infinite, timeless, field of choice.

Each case establishes experiences or readings of form and function or program with parallels to the experiences of minimalist sculpture and painting, which apparently arise from the two types of transparency. Neither case assumes a minimalist experience but rather the phenomenal experience of minimalist art becomes apparent in

the act of experiencing or reading and identifying the type of transparency inherent in the qualities of the

aforementioned elements – datum, module, and structure. While there is congruence in modularity across both

projects – in one case presented as a pictorial, passive cubism and in the case of the Palace a more dynamic, active

cubism, neither case can be presented as Cubist per se. Rather, the elements of datum wall and dynamic structure

paired with their respective integral modules suggest corresponding phenomenal and literal transparencies in support

of a minimalist phenomenology of space and form as in that of minimalist art.

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ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT
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Since the 1990's, Atelier van Lieshout (AVL), founded by current principal Joep van Lieshout, has produced a catalogue of projects operating on the boundaries between art and architecture through design. AVL's work, often infused with elements of fantasy, embraces the "intentionally kitsch" through a diverse set of media, and deploys multidisciplinary processes that allow their small but effective team to consistently address contemporary issues through overlapping disciplines. Spanning an array of themes ranging from power and politics to life and death, among other social and cultural topics (and most often reflecting the interests of Joep himself), AVL poses interesting solutions to critical questions, most notably pertaining to sustainability efforts, by juxtaposing the familiar with the unconventional – effectively blurring the lines between what can be deemed acceptable as art and architecture.

AVL's work is deeply tied to the idea of "useful art" intended for daily life - or functional objects, in a sense technology, produced by artists – and the refusal to let art go to waste, or simply remain as essentially useless objects only subject to observation and criticism. Consequently, since their earliest work they've been driven by a need to stretch the limits of sustainability. *Tampa Skull* ('98) was a living unit that tested the absolute minimum space a human requires for living. Similarly, *Pioneerset* in 1999 proposed a functional and sustainable farming unit based on the design aesthetic of stables, claiming "after all, humans and animals are somewhat equal". The most interesting notion about the two projects, and subsequent others, were that their function was only meaningful at a scale bordering on sculpture. Educated as a sculptor, Joep's and therefore AVL's, work tends to resemble minimalist art, such as that produced by Richard Serra, in terms of phenomenal experience, but introduces elements of architectural design such as function or program. AVL's "inhabitable art" suggests a physical boundary between art (sculpture) and architecture. When a work is at a scale such that it can be experienced *in* the round, as with sculpture, yet can simultaneously can be experienced *within* the round, it becomes nearly indistinguishable from architecture. AVL's inhabitable art, or essentially architecture at a sculptural scale, manifests a tangible boundary between art and architecture or at least offers a convincing proposal.

Also critical to their work is familiarity but juxtaposed with a specific site condition – bringing conventional domestic objects out of their traditional context into an unusual situation as to undermine the original object's initial intentions but also comment on a greater social implication. Much like Tschumi describes the unconventional use of conventional programming in Spaces and Events, but again on a smaller scale, AVL's studio "focuses on creating artworks whose design principles challenge conventional ideas of utility and functionality by reinventing how the viewer perceives or approaches an object and the environment in which it is placed." Their ability to convey such ironic situations is owed to their use non-traditional materials, color palettes, an unusual subject, and strategic site conditioning. *Huize Organus* ('08), a "microworld" of the digestive system from tongue to rectum scaled up to include multiple rooms, suggests a statement on consumption. Its placement on a dike, while odd, is not necessarily meaningless, but a way of portraying the "entrails" as an anomalous decaying, temporary figure – also alluding to the theme of sustainability.

In light of sustainability, AVL has been fascinated with the functionality of complex systems. As in *Huize Organus* a reoccurring theme is the human body – a biological machine involving recycling and digestion, or to extrapolate, life and death which implies a potentially never-ending evolution. Their "anatomy" projects often serve as a type of simulation through spatial movement of human organs encouraging investigation into their inner workings. By

exploring the complexity of the human body through inhabitable organs AVL hoped to call more attention to the idea of efficient systems starting with the individual as the cog in the wheel of society. Joep himself expressed a latent desire "to redesign the human species in a way that would better suit the future of our planet" – reiterating a common concern for the consumption trend of disposability and waste.

It seems AVL's work tends towards the realm of art which is truly meant to be consumed, giving purpose to the artist, object, and consumer, as opposed to "consumer art". Consequently, however, their work, namely their inhabitable art, becomes a more accurate reflection of the consumerist paradigm that Rayner Banham described in Design By Choice. While the important social and cultural messages they attempt to convey are well-intentioned, their vague distinction between function and style has only served to perpetuate the consumerist agenda, and by becoming architecturally active reduces the role of the architect. According to Banham's ideas, AVL's work would be effectively undermining architects by encouraging consumption of a substitution for actual architectural design. This implies AVL's work situates itself largely near the edge of product design instead of the claim that it operates between the boundaries of art, design, and architecture. It remains to be seen whether or not future inhabitable pieces could make the leap from consumer products to architectonic works.

While AVL has undertaken projects that can operate in isolation, they have also pursued projects that become more effective in a series, or "one giant saga". Beginning in 2001 and spanning a whole year, AVL's experimentation in socioeconomic evolution through furniture, sculpture, mobile dwelling units, and utopian or future society was packaged into a proposal in the form of the *Free State of AVL-Ville*, an implied criticism on Western society. They developed the independent "state" in the port of Rotterdam with its own constitution, currency and flag. Involving a holistic approach through architecture, art and design across multiple themes, *AVL-Ville* was a grand experiment in utopian planning and self-sufficiency. The goal was to give art, architecture and design leading roles in shaping a sustainable society – art to live in, with, and by. This stands in direct contrast to Rem Koolhaas; suggestion of an absurd notion about utopian situations created by architecture – that an apparently "free" utopian state, isolated by design, is not truly free. The difference with AVL's proposal, however, is in its holistic, as opposed to strictly architectural approach to developing a utopia. *AVL-Ville's* potential to become a working utopian reality, therefore, lies in its deployment of a diverse and radical agglomeration of media.

Through the explicit forms of their work AVL's "intentional kitsch" boldly answers what mass culture kitsch fails to respond to – in many cases the issue of sustainability in design. Their body of work and countless exhibitions over the last 20 years has proven that their approach ultimately succeeds through an ironic type of shock value. Consequently, AVL is appropriately positioned to engage contemporary issues and those to come, and despite the potentially boundary-shattering implications their work has on art and architecture they can continue to thrive in either realm given that they remain true to their provocative techniques and multidisciplinary approach.

1: THEORY AS THRESHOLD
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Cramer and Betsky pose valid arguments for their respective cases regarding the reality of architectural pragmatism – or the apparent reduction of theory to frivolity - and the idealism of theory in architectural discourse. They, however, seem to have overlooked the fact that both practical architecture, which is simply an assembly of facts about reality, and theory which is an exploration of potential facts (ideals) have coexisted through centuries. While they are independently good arguments, the ongoing tug-of-war between the seemingly opposing "sides" of pragmatism versus theory becomes almost meaningless in that it is essentially the chicken-egg scenario of which came first. Theory's place today is not in a debate as to how much of it is necessary or superfluous but rather as a loose threshold between the real and ideal – proposing what is possible based on what is factual, including what is practical. There are two simple reasons in support of its status. First, theory and non-speculative architecture alike are necessary and inevitable byproducts of socioeconomic conditions in the first place. Neither can escape social context and therefore its limits of control of either the real or ideal rest on those conditions, which leads to the next point. While there is no conceptual limit to what we can speculate, there is a real limit or a point at which speculation no longer tangibly serves the socioeconomic state. Ultimately, theory's status in the discipline is near the intersection of the real and ideal often ambiguously hovering to and from either.

Theory or speculation cannot be detached from socioeconomic reality – market forces in accordance with the political economy. This is most easily identified in Walter Benjamin's discussion of artistic reproduction in the early-20th century industrial, mass-production and consumption world. Essentially, he argues that economic forces are responsible for changing perceptions of art as a result of technological progress. Similarly, Michel Foucault's panopticism – the idea of obscure top-down control from government to academia to the individual suggest the systems and institutions in place work to frame speculative discussion. Any real objective departure of theory from the political economy would only stem from a potential social revolution, as what was attempted with the Mai '68 protests in Paris. Even the avant-garde's original intention of undermining the bourgeois was turned against them and converted to mass culture. Theory in architectural discourse is as natural and inevitable as socioeconomic change. As long as material conditions and the architectonic metaphors they produce are tied to the political economy by market forces, there is no real break from the demands of what is realized than what is idealized.

In *The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language* Manfredo Tafuri stated, "The task of criticism is to begin from within the work only to break out of it as quickly as possible so as not to get caught in the circle of a language speaking only of itself." The dilemma here is that criticism, an active element of theory, fails in practice if it no longer addresses what it criticizes, not to mention meaning can often become lost in the "speculative jargon" that Cramer notes. Where criticism begins to reference itself is where it begins to lose sight of the greater context. Pragmatic architecture like any other relies on some degree of speculative discourse, but specifically requires a limit to theoretical propositions so as not to deny the functionality and efficiency at the essence of practical building. Though it's never quite clear, or clearly ambiguous, the line drawn between practical and phenomenological (metaphorical) architectonic experience tends to hover outside the bounds of the functional architectural elements - as a figment as opposed to a tangible manifestation.

Architecture, no matter how banal, practical or speculative is and always has been reactionary – reacting to not only what came before it but to what could potentially come after. Similarly, the position of theory in architecture is fickle – loosely bridging the span between our

hopes and reality. While they're often in conflict one is paradoxically dependent on the other - it is through theory that we build practical, sustainable and efficient architecture and through the so-called banal that we further speculate. A debate between what degrees of theory should be deployed in the built environment is pointless. What matters is that we use it.

2: THE ARCHITECTURE OF XS, OR EXCESS: ARCHITECTURE'S FUTURE PRECEDENT
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Advanced capitalism has reached its peak. Nowhere is that more evident than in the modern meccas of indulgence. More specifically, one can get a glimpse of what is meant by advanced capitalism by observing a "high-life" plan of Steve Wynn's hotel-casino masterpieces Wynn and Encore. The plan represents the most that private money can buy for a technically public space consisting of a dense agglomeration of disparate programs. Not to mention, to spend a million dollars on a giant, rotating diamond-fitted chandelier (in the appropriately named *XS*) is no small feat, even if it only functions as a crystal blur to tease the senses of the liquor-induced masses. The amount of investment in such a superfluous tchotchke is comparable to building the Egyptian pyramids, leading to the main argument: the Wynn/Encore plan, in its all its glory, is an architectural microcosm for the state of capitalism today. Whether or not it's an indication of an incoming society-wide implosion remains to be seen, but if this is the reality of architecture today, as an iconic pawn of socioeconomic conditions, what path does it lead down in terms of architecture's future? This isn't a re-visitation of the jaded debate on proper resource allocation in an increasingly divided (rich-poor) world. Rather, this is an inquiry into the possibilities of what the luxury commercial building industry can tell or provide us. It seems that in the fervor for luxury accommodation it has accidentally proposed a way of moving forward.

The contemporary hotel-casino in the model of Wynn/Encore effectively denies any sense of real order while remaining strangely democratic. What distinguishes it from the modern American mall, perhaps the hotel-casino's next-closest consumerist counterpart, is primarily their emphasis in program, but both in plan operate essentially the same. They equally demonstrate a remarkable oversaturation – a kind of masking by sensory overload – allowing plan to become transparent, or to recede to the background and program to take its place. It becomes a place where there is no more room to accommodate phenomenology and where careful observation becomes instant gratification, or simply entertainment. What good is metaphor when one can get what he wants when he wants it – a question that bleeds of advanced capitalism. This may suggest that a programmatic emphasis irrespective of plan could allow us to sidestep the metaphorical in favor of the literal or unconventional. A direct interpretation can serve us more immediately, and therefore more purposefully than one that requires contemplation.

The hotel-casino still manages to maintain a democratic sense of passage with banks of slots as stand-ins for columns and partitions. As a whole there is no hierarchical organization of program because it is consistently and erratically democratic, yet it is paradoxically inaccessible to those without the proper socioeconomic standing. A space that, in reality, lends no hint of plan(ning) whatsoever suggests a fairly democratic, non-heirarchical treatment towards visitors. Upon further observation, however, hierarchy is implied through programming, specifically through through the levels of accessibility to areas based on income standing (at least in the moment) – high-roller areas, outdoor cabanas, villa suites. Perhaps Wynn's boldest statement in planning, and a reiteration of the greater socioeconomic context, is indicated in the predictably-placed Ferrari Store across from a car rental and poker room – a subtle implication that winners buy a sports car and losers rent a minivan. Then again, it isn't necessarily an indication of any kind of planning so much as programming. Perhaps architectonically this allows for the possibility of architectural design for the political economy by pure programming – a way of directing the masses in any built environment towards achieving architectonic agendas.

At this point, it becomes clear that contemporary architecture can begin to be defined by amenity. Rosalin Krauss posed an interesting question when it came to what happens to architecture when we lend too much control to non-architectonic or foreign introductions – external objects

imposed by the marketplace in the areas where architecture falls short. What happens is the Wynn/Encore massing and flooding of the products and outcomes of capitalist market forces under one roof – in one form or another, i.e. the car dealership, the auditorium, the buffet, and most essentially an aggregated open plan.

There is no real justification for an excessive expenditure of resources other than as a fantastic, albeit temporary, relief from the droll of the typical American workday. This isn't to say, however, that there is no value to be gained from seemingly non-speculative, luxury commercial developments because clearly what a building lacks in architectonic characteristics it can make up for in programmatic choice. There is too much at stake, especially given the anemic state of contemporary architecture, not to be inspired by even the gaudiest "monstrosities" or extravagant developments. If this is the end of architecture as we know it, then this is a good place to begin to search for a new one.

3: JUNKSPACE ENDNOTES
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1. *Junkspace is a domain of feigned, simulated geometry.* (p. 18)

Junkspace is tied to a tradition of genealogical progress referencing that which came before it in an often kitsch and fleeting expression, and is therefore essentially a collage of seemingly incompatible media. Much like the" authorless" readymades of the Avant-Garde it recycles and regurgitates both what is trending and what has receded resulting in an often strange yet effective statement or representation of a critical idea – a simulation. Junkspace is a space of seeming contradiction and juxtaposition, embracing the unconventionally bold and anonymous masses. Paradoxically, therefore, it is an outcome and critique of the bourgeois mass culture.

2. *There are two kinds of density in Junkspace - the first optical…* (p. 19)

… by which I mean it is first a graphic layer – an immediately-recognizable icon or image needing "no justification for its origin". Junkspace takes on a performative role or what R.E. Somol calls a "speech act". It is instant gratification through image or building itself as decoration. It adopts an iconographic, perhaps shapely, form indebted to its material organization.

3. *… the second informational…* (p. 19)

No other contemporary program matches the second layer of Junkspace than the corporate-American workplace. "Burolandschaft", or office landscaping, calls for the optimization of the data layer according to Hookway. As a product of the information age, Junkspace demands collectivity as opposed to individualization, and therefore a collectivization of tasks – nowhere more thorough and efficient than in the corporate-American workplace. This is emphasized not only in plan or in Herman Miller's Action Office, but also through a networked continuity of "distributed systems" – an information fabric.

4. *Junkspace represents a reverse typology of cumulative, promiscuous identity, less about kind than about quantity.* (p. 19)

To put it in terms of Stan Allen's field relations, Junkspace is a moiré of two coexisting irregular fields – the fields being the previously stated optical and informational densities. Largely operating at the edge of control, Junkspace is an aggregate of independent figures – changing but never necessarily evolving and often escalating together. Like a swarm, Junkspace depends on localized situations referencing their context ultimately acting as a dynamic mass that allows us to rethink conventional form.

5. *This anarchy is one of the last tangible ways in which we measure our freedom. It is a space of collision… There is a special way of moving in Junkspace, at the same time aimless and purposeful.* (p. 19)

I am reminded of the en suite compartmentalization mentioned in Robin Evans' "Figures, Doors and Passages", yet in opposition to the Italian tradition of an elaborate architecture "outside the orbit of social life". Moving through Junkspace is both a facilitator of communication and contact through the proliferation. The space of collision is the unpredictable passage that simultaneously is room providing both the journey and destination.

Junkspace relishes in uncertainty and the chance encounter or the production of what Bernard Tshumi calls "events". Junkspace juxtaposes unconventional situations in conventional program – the "shock" that Tshumi claims is necessary in architectonic communication. Junkspace is simply another exploration of expected form versus expected use.

6. *Junkspace will be our tomb.* (p. 21)

We live and die by the social and political economy. Junkspace is another byproduct of the machine of production and consumption – of advanced capitalism – and therefore cannot be separated from its greater context. It would not exist without the forces of the market – the endless bureaucracy and consumption patterns that enable the machine to function. Junkspace is the residue or fallout of the consequences of endless interactions and exchanges.