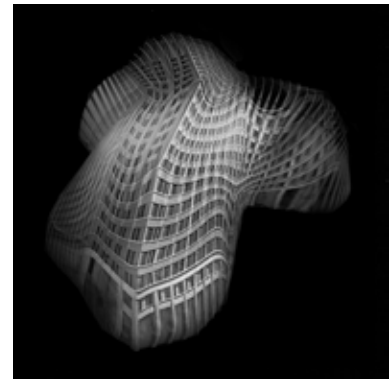


## Post-9/11 Architecture: Cultural Blur and the Return of Minor Languages



1– „schinkelize the blob“, Multimediaarbeit / Philip Loskant / 2004

The concept of the blur found its way into the architectural discourse in the mid-nineties. After an architectural discussion of fragmentation, of collage and representation in the eighties—feeding off the aura of the Cold War and social tension—the nineties became a decade of reunification and blurring.

The blur first occurred as a social phenomenon, it was another name for the lack of distinction between political camps, races and once seemingly opposing phenomena; such as the east and the west, black and white, or the virtual and reality. Thus, Peter Eisenman, for example, talked about a new sensibility that “does not tend to articulate ... differences but rather blurs them.

**„Our project operates between the landscape and the object, blurring both conditions into one heterogeneous space.“**

Peter Eisenman about the Bibliothèque de L'IHUEI, (Geneva, Switzerland, 1996)

**„The combination and interrelation of infrastructure and culture is a direct response to the condition of our times, one that brings about new relationships (...). Our intervention on Staten Island will blur the two, bringing about a wholly new.“**

Peter Eisenman about the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, (New York, USA, 1997)

**“The new sensibility does not tend to articulate their differences but rather blurs them. And it is the blurring of their difference, which is one aspect of the bifurcated discourse. Bifurcation is when both sensibilities are enfolded rather than being pulled apart – they exist together.“**

Peter Eisenman, »Talking about a new Sensibility« in: transHuman, nr. 6, (gta-Verlag, Zurich, 2000)

And it is the blurring of their difference, which is one aspect of the bifurcated discourse. Bifurcation is when both sensibilities are enfolded rather than being pulled apart—they exist together.<sup>1</sup> Theorized on the basis of the French post-structuralists, such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the blur was promoted as the more fitting way to deal with complex general organisational systems and processes, outclassing the former systems based on ‘category’, ‘structure’ and ‘hierarchy’. Greg Lynn, for example, argued that deconstructive design techniques cannot cope with the fluid and complex conditions of late twentieth-century urban life, as they allow only for a static rastering and collage. He claimed that we need motion-based design techniques, a new attention to shaping forces, and an inorganic vitalism, which will sponsor “animate form”.<sup>2</sup> Terms such as ‘non-dialectic’, ‘hybrid’, ‘field’ as well as ‘virtual reality’ suggested in-between conditions without drawing clear borders. Non-Euclidean space replaced Cartesianism; topological surfaces replaced Platonic forms. Attempts to blur oppositions such as landscape and building, building and sculpture, or virtual space and architectural space became key theoretical issues in the late nineties.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the blur became mainstream and something changed. In Diller & Scofidio’s “Blur building” at the Swiss Expo 2002, the blur is given materiality in a very literal sense, but there is no more connection to the theoretical discourse of blurring. Equally literally, a range of architects from Herzog & de Meuron to Kazuyo Sejima worked with semi-transparent materials to create ephemeral blurred surfaces, while others, including Sir Norman Foster and Sauerbruch & Hutton, adopted formal strategies that were “almost” non-Euclidean.

With its focus exclusively on formal, structural and aesthetic fields of investigation, most contemporary blur architecture became, in a semiotic sense, mute. The main message—“Look at me, I am different! Since I question



2– „Embryological House“ / Greg Lynn / 1999



3– „Zentrum Paul Klee“, Bern, Switzerland / Renzo Piano / 2005 / © Dominique Uldry, Bern

the classical logic of form, I am avantgarde and thus my client is progressive too”—has been mediated since the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao opened in 1997. Since then, this simplistic iconography of avantgarde architecture hasn't altered much, as for example Zaha Hadid's recent BMW Headquarters in Leipzig demonstrates. Comparable to a successful advertisement slogan, this one-dimensional message has been driving avantgarde architecture hype in the last years. And yet architecture enjoys a presence in the media greater than ever before. Avantgarde architects now have the opportunity to realise projects that for decades were dismissed as utopian—take for instance Peter Cook's Kunsthau in Graz—and they will be richly rewarded with media attention. Simultaneously, this sparing of messages detached architecture from daily life's diversified interrelations and brought to an end any use of architecture as a medium of complex social communication.

### Paradigm shift – from the blur of form to the blur of language

But what happened meanwhile to the 'non-dialectic' society of the nineties, the social roots of 'the blur'? What happened to the 'multi-cultural', to 'hybrid personalities' and to the refusal to make categorical distinctions? Since September 11, 2001, global society has changed dramatically. Going back to the black-and-white categories of the cold war or the era of crusades, the present U. S. government's rhetoric divides the world into the "Alliance of the Willing" which fights the "Axis of Evil", splits up our continent into "old Europe" and "the new Europe", contrasts people who have the "right to justice" with those who have forfeited that right. Radical politicians and imams polarise the Islamic world in a similar way. Instead of peaceful coexistence the world is again witnessing religious and ethnic extremism.

Can today's architectural discourse blissfully ignore all of this polarisation and go on regarding the blur as a pure aesthetic or theoretical question, an approximation of the fluid and supple systems of the natural sciences that veils the social context of architecture? This seems untenable. In the post-9/11 era, architecture has to incorporate not only the theoretical and formal implications of "the blur" but also its socio-cultural dimensions.

Blurring cultures, lifestyles and belief systems has always been a major catalyst for peace and cultural innovation. Therefore an innovative and socially relevant blur architecture should be the aim: as a general consequence, formal and spatial logics of blur architecture should be informed by the cultural modes of social and ritual blurring. Thereby it would adapt to the new cultural requirements. At the same time, it should theorise a blurring of architectural languages and iconography. In the process it would gain acceptance from different social groups, and could, furthermore advance to a legitimate medial promoter of cultural blur in the service of peace.

But what does a reintroduction of language into architecture mean, and didn't we overcome this specific post-modern "trap"? Blurred architectural languages should not be confused with the simple semiotic system that Venturi and Scott Brown were championing in the nineteen-seventies.<sup>3</sup> Their concept of "duck" or "decorated shed" supported an architectural iconography that mediates simple messages, readable in one specific way, or sometimes in an additional ironic connotation. The favoured "decorated shed" strengthens that by using text and widely known signs to promote a "message". To find out what blurred architectural languages might be, the suggestions offered by



4– „Blur Building“, Expo 02, Yverdon, Switzerland / Diller & Scofidio / 2002



5– „Nebel“ / C. D. Friedrich / 1807 / Österreichische Galerie im Belvedere, Vienna



6– „Ground Zero – Image #2756“ / G.N. Miller, / 2001



7– „The building as icon“ / Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, Steven Izenour / in Learning from Las Vegas– The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form / © MIT Press, Cambridge, 1968

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Minor Literature* are more helpful: “There isn’t a subject, there are only collective assemblages of enunciation. ... Minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.” These revolutionary conditions are achieved by “a blur of languages, and not at all a system of languages”.<sup>4</sup> Building on Deleuze and Guattari, Paul Delaney explains that “by re-articulating a ‘deterritorialized’ or displaced language which has become major (through trade or conquest, for instance), and by injecting into it local signifying practices and defamiliarizing strategies, it has been supposed that the minor writer might be able to intervene in the social cohesion of the dominant discursive system. ... Therefore a new way of using, combining and blurring pre-existing models of expression incorporates the acquisition of languages.”<sup>5</sup>

At first glance, the “ugly and ordinary”<sup>3</sup> of everyday cultures is an example of minor architectural language and might deliver the lingual ‘raw material’ for the operations described above. But much more the search for structures of blurred cultural synthesis, request to incorporate strategies of pre-modernistic architecture and investigate existing architectures of “cultural blur” beyond the borders of the western international style. Opening up the mind beyond the contemporary borders of the discipline also opens the eyes to a vast field of blurring conditions in all time’s architecture. Not only as an avantgarde strategy but also as a cultural strategy often emerging where religious and political tension occurred, blurring can be found in architectural borderlands, whether defined historically or geographically.

The Indian region of Rajasthan is a good example. Beginning in the fifteenth century, fundamentally different religions—monotheistic Islam and polytheistic Hinduism—merged

to form Rajasthanian culture. The native Hindu tribes of this area assimilated their rites, myths and art with the Islamic system of their dominant neighbours, the Moghul empires. On the one hand, the poly-cultural blur of the Hindu Rajputs was a strategy of formal cooperation with the dominant Islamic system. On the other hand, it subverted the dominating culture as a minor language. Because the Moghul rulers considered Rajasthanian art to be semi-Islamic and therefore ‘politically correct’, its formal language was able to infiltrate Islamic art and lead to the partial deterritorialization of the Hindu culture in the region. The Indo-Islamic style emerged. Striking examples of this exchange of adversarial languages are the Rajput Palace of Maharana Udai Singh in Udaipur, and the Mughal administrative city of Fatehpur Sikri by Mughal Akbar, both erected in the late sixteenth century. This cultural blurring was taken a step further in the nineteenth century by the British colonial administration, in a similar context. The British, superior in terms of political and military power, but far outnumbered, incorporated the Indo-Islamic style in their colonial architecture, blurring it with European typologies. As Andreas Volwahren writes, “The close links between the Indo-Saracenic building of British architects and Indian Islamic architecture was due to two key factors. Firstly, in the nineteenth

**“However, as Deleuze’s concept of The Fold became the main focus of theoretical architecture (...), my concern with this was that it still continued an Enlightenment modernist tendency to avoid the messiness and vulgarity of everyday consumer praxis, an issue that Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown tried to bring into the consciousness of architecture. (...) There was, in fact, a semiotic and experiential dimension to Deleuze and Guattari that was missing from the initial and perhaps biased reading by architectural theorists, which resulted in a privileging of unadorned topology.”**

Steven Perella, »Hypersurface: architecture>>culture« in: Architectural Design – Hypersurface Architecture No 133, (London, 1998)

**„The “...ambiguous edges, changing borders, that differ from this or that material . . . Each function of language divides up in turn and carries with it multiple centers of power. A blur of languages, and not at all a system of languages”**

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in: *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986)



9- „Visvanatha temple“, Khajuraho, India 11th century a.c.



10-“Viceroy’s House, The Portico“,New Delhi, India / Arch. Sir Edwin Lutyens / 1913



11-„Constantia Palace“, Lucknow, India / Arch. Claude Martin / 1790

century, British engineers and architects in India developed a knowledge and appreciation of the wealth of forms of Indian Islamic architecture. ... Secondly, at the same time there was a growing hope among the political representatives of the Crown in India that they would be able to consolidate and demonstrate their claim to power by adopting indigenous forms and symbols”<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, vassal rulers took over this blend of architectural languages to collaborate with the superior British and support their own culture at the same time. The High Court in Madras (Tamil Nadu) built by J.W. Brassington and Henry Irwin (1888–92), or the Laxmi Vilas Palace by Major Charles Mant for the Gaekwar of Baroda (1881–90), are good examples, as well as the later work of Sir Edwin Lutyens for the Government in New Delhi (1913). These examples have something in common: Their architecture neither searches for one message, expressed in one cultural language, nor creates one clear lingual system; it establishes a “blur of languages” (as Deleuze put it), an infiltration of elements and strategies of the one into the other. A rhizome of relations in structure and meaning is created, never leaving a doubt that aims of both cultures are expressed in the same architecture.

Recent examples

in the western world are still rudimentary. Newer designs by Herzog & de Meuron show first attempts. For instance the new library at the University of Cottbus, Germany, completed in early 2005: its edgeless amoebic footprint and the semi-transparent double facade create the no longer novel blur of vision and form. Furthermore, the building abounds with architectural associations of a mediaeval monastery’s tower on a hill; the expression of the building revives images of a mythical middle age. The building’s language creates a historical blur merging romanticism with a technophile avantgardism—or ‘tradition’ with ‘utopia’, as Colin Rowe would have put it.

A better but still rudimentary example of culturally blurred meaning is offered by the Prada Epicenter in Los Angeles by OMA/Rem Koolhaas, which opened in 2004.<sup>7</sup> The architect deems the oval, glass openings in the entrance area’s floor the “peep show”. These holes open the view to an underworld of display-dummies clothed in Prada-wear. A huge bridge dominates the interior. The elevator shaft is covered with display screens of blown-up paintings—such as Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Pleasures* from 1450–1516, which in the original triptych is surrounded by *Hell* and *Heaven*. The second floor features the “Privalite” wall, a display system showing collages of bitmap images, generated by computer software according to frequent terms occurring in real-time internet news tickers. OMA’s diagram for this feature shows depictions of the *Last Judgment* by various painters (see image on next page).

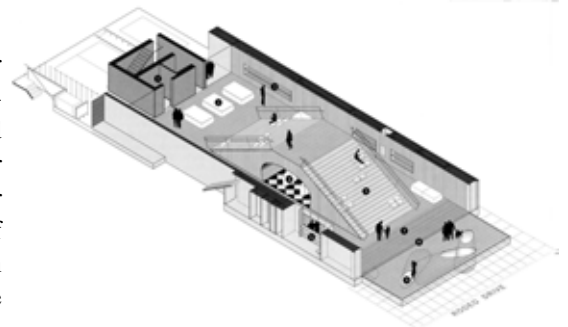
Now, what does all this mean? A Prada client may see Koolhaas’ Epicenter store as an example of event architecture, collaging the classical and the mythological into secular culture, a literal garden of pleasure. The staircase would be read in its Baroque and nineteenth-century bourgeois meaning as a place for personal representation, a place of looking and being looked at. The elevator displays and the Privalite wall may be taken for a symbol of the plenitude of media culture. A more educated viewer, in turn, may see an allegory of western culture in the OMA design, replacing the traditional theocentric perspective with an egocentric one, replacing god with commerce. In this reading, today’s ‘stairway to heaven’ leads to the upper levels of media pleasure and high-end fashion. Finally, the critical and moralistic viewer, such as the religious



12– „Bibliothek der Universität Cottbus“, Germany / Herzog & de Meuron / 2005



14 – “The Last Judgment” / Hieronymus Bosch / early 16<sup>th</sup> century



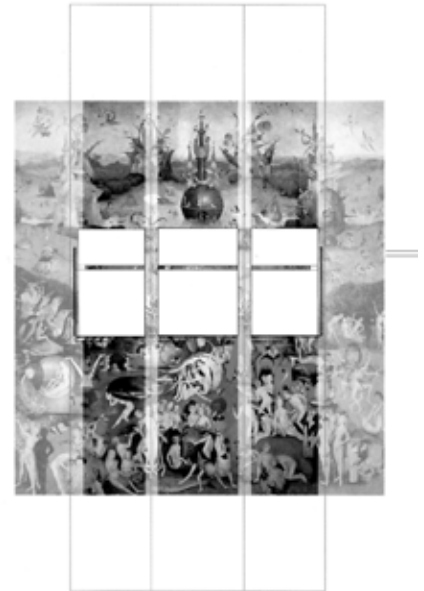
13– “PRADA Epicenter Los Angeles, Ground Level” / OMA/Rem Koolhaas / 2004

Christian or Muslim, will see things in yet another light, recognising in the Prada Epicenter an apocalyptic critique of hyper-capitalist vanity. Bolstering this reading, we may point out that Bosch's *Last Judgment* depicts a bridge identical in shape to the one Koolhaas designed. For Christians and Muslims, a bridge in this context is a symbol for the passage into the after-world. The ones who cross it reach heaven, the ones who fail descend into hell. In the eye of the critical viewer, the *peep show* would then represent an underworld of vain creatures who failed to cross the bridge on the way into (Prada-) heaven, the show staircase would become the bridge to the last judgment, and the Privalite wall would show an apocalyptic Sodom and Gomorra, an orgiastic display of a reprehensible amoral culture. Although one could then infer that Koolhaas is using the Prada Epicenter to voice a moralistic critique of hyper-capitalism, he also remains an amoral architect who is happy to fulfil the wishes of any client. By not offering a clear syntax or signification, the Prada store is a blurred amalgam of bourgeois, religious and critical culture. Minor languages are woven into the imperial order without revealing or defining the architect's motivation or preferences.

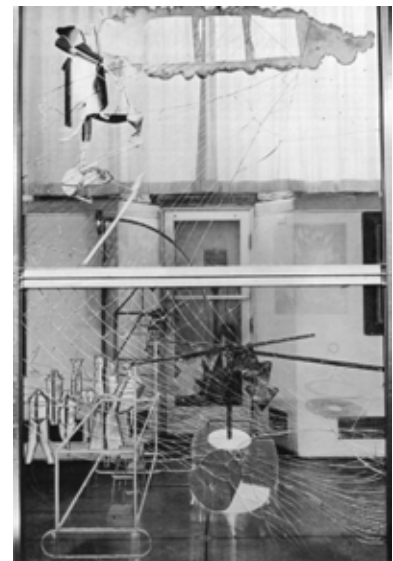
## Conclusion

The contemporary examples show that the reconsideration of the cultural and semiotic dimensions in architecture risks rehashing well-known post-modern fallacies. But continuing the self-referential discourse of the *blob* or the *blur*, as the avantgarde architecture does today, is not a good alternative. In its hermeticism, it takes refuge in a neo-romantic discourse, adoring the internationally styled sublimity of abstract form, while the civilised world is on fire. Since the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or the Kunsthaus in Graz were erected and the Twin Towers in New York collapsed, architecture has again become an object of cultural identification. However, in our post-9/11 era, these cultures have changed dramatically, and the modernistic "global society" becomes history. If not aspiring to a new era of cold and hot wars, the return to cultural individuality implies cultural blurs on its tensional ideological borders—the inner and outer ones.

In this context, our contemporary architectural discourse cannot go on championing the, still practiced, "international style". Architecture has to react to the implications of the cultural blur—to continue the discourse of the blur, and to support architecture's relevance in today's society.



15 – "PRADA Epicenter Los Angeles, lift diagram" / OMA/Rem Koolhaas / 2004 /



16– „The Bride – Undressed by Her Bachelors“ / Marcel Duchamp / 1915–23

## Quellennachweis:

- 1- Peter Eisenman, "Talking about a new Sensibility – Interview with Peter Eisenmann", in: *Trans*, no. 6, *TransHuman* (Zürich: Architektura, 2000), p. 66.
- 2 - vid. Greg Lynn, *Animate Form* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).
- 3 - vid. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas, The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge MA: MIT-Press, 1972), chapter II.
- 4 - Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 18ff. William C. Brown explains that "For Deleuze and Guattari, polylingualism is a way of resisting the universalizing impulse implicit in an official language, 'the language of masters'."
- 5 - Delaney further elaborates: "The tactic adopted in this respect, then, becomes less an attempt at linguistic subversion or canonical kowtowing, and more an effect of cultural innovation, and coincides neatly with Réda Bensmaïa's suggestion that the aim of the minor writer is to propose 'a new way of using' pre-existing models of expression. (...) Bensmaïa effectively undermines any grandiose attempts at linguistic subversion by asking 'how many writers and poets have supposedly "subverted" language without ever having caused the slightest ripple.'", in: Paul Delaney, "Decolonization and the Minor Writer", in: *Postcolonial Forum Online* (Canterbury, January 2001), pp. 1, 8; See also Réda Bensmaïa, "Foreword: The Kafka Effect", in: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986). <http://www.kent.ac.uk/english/postcolonial/postcolonialforum/essays.html> (06.06.2006),
- 6 - Andreas Volwahn, *Splendours of Imperial India, British Architecture in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Munich: Prestel, 2004), p. 269.
- 7 - For further images and a technical description see *Archplus*, no. 175 (Aachen, December 2005), pp. 38–57.

## Bildnachweis:

- 1– „schinkelize the blob“, Multimediaarbeit / Philip Loskant / 2004 / © P.L.
- 2– „Embryological House“ / Greg Lynn / 1999 / © glForm
- 3– „Zentrum Paul Klee“, Bern, Switzerland / Renzo Piano / 2005 / © Bild Dominique Uldry, Bern
- 4– „Blur Building“, Expo 02, Yverdon, Switzerland / Diller & Scofidio / 2002 / © P.L.
- 5– „Nebel“ / C. D. Friedrich / 1807 / © Österreichische Galerie im Belvedere, Vienna
- 6– „Ground Zero – Image #2756“ / G.N. Miller, / 2001
- 7– „The building as icon“ / Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, Steven Izenour / in *Learning from Las Vegas– The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* / © MIT Press, Cambridge, 1968
- 8– „Blurred Cognition“ (Vexierbild – Hund mit Flecken)“ / Josef Langenegger / © 01/10/05 <http://www.langeneggers.ch>
- 9– „Visvanatha Temple“, Khajuraho, India / 11th century / in *Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture– North India* / © American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi, 1998
- 10– „Viceroy's House, The Portico“, New Delhi, India / Arch. Sir Edwin Lutyens / 1913 / in *Sir Edwin Lutyens* / © Country Live Pub. Ltd., London, 1950
- 11– „Constantia Palace“, Lucknow, India / Arch. Claude Martin / 1790 / © in *Splendours of Imperial India*, Prestel Verlag, 2004
- 12– „Bibliothek der Universität Cottbus“, Germany / Herzog & de Meuron / 2005 / © P.L.
- 13– „PRADA Epicenter Los Angeles, Ground Level“ / OMA/Rem Koolhaas / 2004 / © OMA
- 14 – „The Last Judgment“ / Hieronymus Bosch / early 16<sup>th</sup> century/ © Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna
- 15 – „PRADA Epicenter Los Angeles, lift diagram“ / OMA/Rem Koolhaas / 2004 / © OMA
- 16– „The Bride – Undressed by Her Bachelors“ / Marcel Duchamp / 1915–23 / © Philadelphia Museum of Art, USA