An Unresolved Schism

The fight between the Whites and the Greys was, on one level, a struggle for dominance in who would be the founding fathers of post-modernism—who would define the text, curate the canon, and inherit the lineage of Le Corbusier. But on a more fundamental level, it was a fight for the very soul of architecture itself. The questions at the base of their dispute had to do with what the ultimate point and purpose of architecture was, and how (or even whether) the practice of architecture should reflect it. In this respect, this academic debate of 1973 was closest in analogy to the earth-shattering theological schism of 1517 between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation. In his introduction to the Whites, Colin Rowe used the word “eschatological”—the part of theology concerned with death, judgement, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind—to describe the scale of this debate. I would argue that this was appropriate, at least in its ramifications for the soul of architecture.

By the analogy of religion, Colin Rowe’s criticism of modern architecture was akin to Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses against the Catholic Church, in the sense that they both called the actions of their respective establishments “heresy:” practice that ran contrary to their stated principles. In the case of Luther, the Church’s operation of a cottage industry for souls in exchange for exorbitant wealth contradicted its stated Christian mission to help humanity. In the case of Rowe, modern architecture had not fulfilled its theoretical promise that architects would remake the world by remaking the built world; that they could create social, political, and ethical order through aesthetic order. Rowe wrote of a “gap between what was anticipated and what has been delivered,” and that “if the real political issue of the present is not the provision of the rich with cake but of the starving with bread, then not only formally but also programmatically these buildings are irrelevant.”

Just as the Church was in principle supposed to feed the poor, but in
practice indulged the rich, modern architecture was not serving humanity’s real needs—it had
instead become “the acceptable decoration of a certainly non-Utopian present,” and mere
“illustrations of these enthusiasms” of an architect as activist. Empirically, modern architects
were not practicing what they preached.

Rowe went so far as to argue that this was not only a current problem, but that
modernism’s social doctrine had never been compatible with actual practice except for a “brief
co-existence some thirty to forty years ago.” This was akin to saying that perhaps Christ
himself (i.e. Le Corbusier) had truly practiced Christianity during his own brief lifetime, but that
the institution of the Church that came after him had only ever been a sham attempt at enacting
its gospel: “Thus it could come to be argued that, from almost the beginning, the buildings
erected in the name of modern architecture had comprised an enormous series of
misunderstandings… that ultimately, they had constituted no more than a simultaneously
sophisticated and naive rearrangement of spaces.” Rowe here suggests that activist architecture
was not only empirically unsuccessful, but also ontologically impossible—the practice and
domain of architecture was in the arrangement of spaces, not of world order. The idea that
architecture could be anything more had always been hubristic, irrational, emotion-driven, and
most damningly, a psychoanalytic “suppression of feelings of guilt” in the mind of the architect, who had fought under the banner of this pseudo-social-scientific rationale so passionately for so long because it was the only way in which architects—who were not empiricists nor scientists, but artists and visionaries—could swallow the “guilt” they felt in making personal aesthetic
choices in the age of rationality. For Rowe, this was not an erasure of the half-century of work
that had passed between Le Corbusier and himself, but rather a condemnation of it—because
architecture had lied to itself, seduced itself into believing that it had the qualifications for a job utterly outside its real repertoire.

Up to this point in the argument, I would argue that Rowe’s hammer blows were entirely reasonable (if overgeneralized, as he himself admitted). Wherever one chooses to locate the exact moment when modernism fell—whether in the demolition of Yamasaki’s Pruitt-Igoe housing project or in the erection of his World Trade Centre—it is clear that social goals mostly failed when put in the hands of architects, whether in housing, urban renewal, or planned cities. Rowe’s summary of the situation was that “the physique and the morale of modern architecture, its flesh and its word, were (and could) never be coincident.” The Whites and the Greys must have more or less agreed up to this point—there was a profound problem at the heart of what had previously been considered by all to be the gospel truth of modern architecture. But now that all recognized the old doctrine as dead, in what direction were they to turn? What was to be done about this gap between principle and practice, between word and flesh? Or as Rowe asked, “Do we adhere to physique-flesh or to morale-word?”

This was the point of schism between the Whites and the Greys: two factions of reformers who both agreed that architecture required a new morale-word—a new point and purpose—but disagreed on what it should be. The extreme stance of the Whites, as penned by Rowe and practiced by the New York Five, was that instead of working to reform the practice of architecture to better obey its original social principles—for example, by empirically studying the human needs and usages of buildings and cities, and engineering truly useful applications for architecture—they should abandon the social, cultural, and political aspect of architecture completely in favour of exploring its purely formal possibilities. They argued that the way in which MoMA had introduced modern architecture to America in 1932—as pure aesthetic style,
removed from all pretension to change the world—had been the *correct* way to think about architecture. Architecture’s “disinfection from political inference, its divorce from possibly doubtful ideas” would kill the lie that it was a global solution for human peace and order, and allow architecture to become the intellectual art form it truly was by nature.⁸

Kenneth Frampton described John Hejduk’s work, for example, as “fugal”⁹—this was a keen analogy that cut to the point of the Whites’ work. A fugue is a musical composition with multiple independent melodic lines that are played in parallel; it begins with a short original melody, which is then developed into successive variations that are incrementally interwoven and layered on top of each other, becoming increasingly more complex and computationally taxing as the composition goes on. The comparison of Hejduk’s House 10 to a fugue evokes the work of an artist like Bach, whose many fugues were commissioned by European monarchs as courtly entertainment and demonstration of his artistic, mathematical, and computational genius. It was a display of form for form’s sake; technique with the goal of seeing how far technique could be pushed; art as intellectual sport. Hejduk’s fugue of a house kept Frampton frustrated: plans were “all shown without any anthropomorphic key,” and it was “impossible to know the program in this case since these hieroglyphic drawings are presented without either legend or furniture.”¹⁰ House 10 was thus a building designed first and foremost as an unresolved spatial game of wits, an intellectual exercise that provoked, misled, and experimented with the user; a “secretive” “mirage” of “restless interactions” that operated by a “code,” as Frampton described.¹¹ The metric of the “ABABA grid” that he used to decipher Hejduk’s representations was like the skeleton of a highly technical poem, musical composition, or a game of Go.

Thus the new doctrine—the *morale-word*—of architecture that the Whites proposed, was to strip architecture of all application to real world users, needs, or functions, and to freely
experiment with form strictly for the intellectual pleasure of unfolding its infinite possibilities. No more social and political pressure, no more guilt, no more value beyond its own domain, no more religion for the masses—but an entirely self-referential, self-enclosed “cult of form.”

I would argue that this form of architectural extremism was not problematic in and of itself. As long as it remained situated in its context as a small style practiced by five architects for a handful of private patrons in Manhattan, it could be accepted as an art form like any other—such as the Mondrian paintings Hejduk referenced in his work. It was but a small twig off the multiple branches of competing theory that sprang from the death of modernism.

The problem as I—and Robert Stern, the ambassador for the Greys—see it lies in its presentation. The MoMA exhibition glorified and codified the Whites in “a major publication with slick, thick paper and overworked graphics…burdened with so much technique; so much inflation of so little that seems really vital or important,” as Stern wrote. The result was that this minority theory became institutionally legitimized and studied out of proportion with its real impact in the world. The Harvard Graduate School of Design currently pays tribute to Hejduk’s “Nine Square Grid Exercise” in an exhibition that proudly describes it as having “pioneered the radical transformation in the curricula taught by major architecture schools in the United States between the 1950s and the 1960s,” and as purposefully “self-referential… assuredly tied to irresolution.” In Harvard Design Magazine, Timothy Love states that the goal of the exercise was to force students to think of design in terms of “spatially complex geometric schema” rather than of “amenities” like kitchens or “symbols” like pitched roofs. As Love puts it, “‘Spatially complex rather than simplistic’ became the goal of design development and critique.”

Rowe claimed that it depended on our values whether this shift was a tragedy or a triumph—this is true. But if one’s values are at all related to fellow humans and their well-being,
this can only be seen as a tragedy. To indoctrinate an entire generation of architects to disregard any kind of social or civic concern through their professional work is explicitly “the provision of the rich with cake” over the “starving with bread,” as Rowe himself criticized of modernism. It is to teach all architects to design intellectually impenetrable, nigh unusable “paper architecture,” solely for rich patrons who have the luxury to puzzle over their private villas as architectural fugues. It is to equip architects with the skills to design less than 1% of the world’s building needs—the promotion of a heartless, inhumane, irrelevant point and purpose for architecture.

Robert Stern and the Greys justifiably attacked the Whites for this reason. In his rebuttal, Stern reasonably questioned why Rowe arbitrarily supported the form of 1920s modern architecture if he didn’t, in fact, support the theory that birthed it. Rowe was uncharacteristically weak on this point, proclaiming without rhyme or reason that the 1920s had produced “profound visual discoveries” that were “so enormous as to impose a directive which cannot be resolved in any individual life span.” He wrote that this vocabulary had “eloquence,” “flexibility,” and that it was “overwhelming”—but in relation to what? For what purpose? In what way? It was never explained why the Whites so scorchingly damned the word of modernism but continued to wholeheartedly worship its flesh—the same purist form that had been abandoned by its own creator, Le Corbusier. Rowe did admit that his was “an argument largely about the physique of building and only indirectly about its morale”—but this seems like a massive cop-out given the stakes of this schism. In response, Stern condemned the Whites for having become so Puritanical that they were incapable of interacting with the rest of the world, and might as well have sailed off to find the New World completely on their own.

The Greys’ criticism of the Whites up to this point makes sense from the perspective of a human who cares at all about other humans, and wants architecture to reflect this value.
However, when the Greys put forth their own idea of reformation—their own new point and purpose for architecture—it, too, was riddled with problems. Stern presented as obvious fact that “the essential purpose of architecture” was to realize “man’s understanding of his place in relationship to the natural world and other man-made objects.” Where did this come from? It seems just as academic, arbitrary, and unsupported by the Greys’ actual practice as the modernist tradition they sought to reform. It suggested that at this moment, the “essential purpose of architecture” was so inconstant and so lacking in consensus that it was changing left and right: Was the purpose of architecture to produce intellectual pleasure? To produce sensorial pleasure? To build shelter and needed structures for people? Or was it to perfect man's understanding of his place in relationship to the world? How was one to choose among these potential purposes?

Stern argued the case for the Greys’ version of architectural purpose by casting it as “American/pragmatic,” in opposition to the Whites’ “European/Idealist” purpose. But this was a gross simplification of the situation. Rowe would argue that the Whites were actually far more American, in that they thought of architecture strictly as the practice of building buildings, “consciously unequipped with any such implicit social program or politically critical pedigree” as was done in Europe. He might also argue that the Whites were also far more pragmatic than idealistic: he shrugged that mid-twentieth century architects cared only trivially about the ethical dimension of their work—not even Venturi and Scott-Brown really cared for the residents of Las Vegas—in comparison to their obsession with the built product. It was thus pragmatic to accept this professional tendency as it was, than to force it to be, or claim that it was something it was not. This exposed some of the weaknesses in the Greys’ patriotic self-characterization—they might in fact have been the Europeans (realizing man’s understanding of his place in the
world sounds to me like Heidegger’s concept of “dwelling,” or the manner in which humans are on the earth), and the Idealists (in even trying to realize this understanding) in this equation.

Last, the question arises of whether the built work of the Greys actually enacted their stated purpose. Venturi’s addition to Bard College’s Stevenson Library, for example, may have contributed a good deal of symbolic meaning through its simultaneous contrast and echo of the classical pantheon: Herbert Muschamp wrote that “Venturi’s library is his contribution to the Great Books debate” by reconciling the poles of rigid Classical reason and spontaneous, yellow-striped intuition, integrating “the left and right sides of the brain”—Muschamp took this to be an “apt message for this house of learning.” But this seems rather distant from an architecture that is attempting to realize “man’s understanding of his place in relationship to the natural world and other man-made objects.” This given purpose suggests a more phenomenological, physically embodied experience of the building, which is lacking in its wallpaper-like facades. This form of architectural purpose was thus fuzzily defined and academically removed from actual experience.

In their own respective ways, the Whites and the Greys both fought to define the new point and purpose of architecture in the post-modern era. At the end of this eschatological fight, however, neither side of the debate put forth a compelling singular “destiny” for the soul of architecture—both were flawed in rhetoric, execution, or values. Perhaps this impasse is responsible for post-modernism’s fractured nature. Fredric Jameson wrote that postmodernism was a kind of “schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers,” due to a “breakdown of the signifying chain.” But just as the language of architecture as a logic of signifiers was broken and scattered, so too was the very point and purpose of architecture. Despite the attempts of the Five on Five to resolve this enormous schism for the soul of architecture, it remains unresolved.
Works Cited

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21 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, no. 146, July/August 1984, 72