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The Architecture of Corruption

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In May 2016 the president, Vladimir Putin, inspected the Russian army's new and prestigious 'Patriot' personnel carrier. To his obvious bemusement when he reached to open the door the handle came away in his hand. The General presenting the project tossed it through the open vehicle window and scrabbled to release the door from the inside. The best, and swiftly deleted, ten-second video was pure slapstick.

Corruption in the construction industry is frequently portrayed as something benign; used bank notes in a brown envelope surreptitiously exchanged to smooth the way for a project or deal. An isolated event that manifestly benefits an official with a predictable and identifiable outcome; permission to build or demolish something that contravenes regulation or consensus, bringing profit to a select few. Yet its corrosive and endemic influence pervades much deeper into Architecture, both its representation and production, profoundly distorting the success of the intentions and processes that shape it.

The inevitable 'race to the bottom' with no incentive for work to be completed correctly leads to ever lower quality design and construction, fakery and substitution governed by lackadaisical responsibility and laissez faire coordination. The deeper tragedy is that a traditional sense of craft, skill or workmanship, with a corresponding aspiration for generosity, quality and delight in our environment has limited currency or audience. It is not expected, nor delivered. Rather, a disproportionate fetishisation of standardised product and ease of maintenance leads to an awkward hybrid of expediency, clichéd 'designer' tropes and the need for buildings that act as relays in the circulation of capital.

The frank recognition of this flawed context for endeavour and the persuasive certainty of unintelligible failure, leads to an

architecture that, where it is attempted, is laced by nagging doubt and easy deference to the low aspirations of a common denominator. Doubt not as a harbinger of imagination and invention, as a means of distinguishing a work from merely solving a problem, but as styling. That is to say a final, formal characteristic that is given to elements after the structure has been designed in a disinterested composition. The conditions and attributes of the building, programme or context cease to be important. The architectural object becomes a theoretical instrument with an institutionalised role to make it comprehensible as a product, albeit one that does not deliver good value.

Around corrupt cultural practices a recognisable and easily digested body of doctrine forms that pervades both representation and education to champion self-reflexive objects that sit outside any recoverable value. This is a working methodology that privileges graphic style, or lack thereof, not as a tool to explore the concrete reality of the architecture but as an end to itself. The reality of this passive embrace leads to an abdication by all involved to achieve quality. Consequently the success of a project, beyond individual gain, can only be measured in criteria such as RAL colour and the selective application of abstract yet highly prescriptive design normative.

How can an architecture be developed that cannot rely upon material, detail or shared ambition for its generosity? The answer may lay in an idea about the articulation of deliberate and measured design intentions, across different qualities of scale, that are not related to traditional handicraft or material quality. An approach that deals with an industrial process of arranging elements, spaces and components in a way that find measure and resonance in the outwardly indeterminate and give shape to an underlying integrity.¹ A clear intention

about how a problem can be confidently solved, conscious of the reality in which it operates, and somehow visibly delights in the communication of the reflexive condition that brought it about.

In the architecture of corruption, where the intention is deliberate, frequently things pretend to be something they are not, or flagrantly operate at the expense of correctness or conventions of familiar models. This is not a knowing mannerist game like Giulio Romano's Palazzo del Te, playing to an audience that is in on a sophisticated joke that subverts elements within a known typological envelope. Nor is it necessarily the Vanna Venturi house where an image of an architectural type, and a variety of generalised elements, are precisely employed without any explicit relationship to the formal structure, or the original model, to create something singular.² Nonetheless the idea of typology as an instrument of cultural memory and a condition of architectural meaning is a useful vehicle to identify and describe an architecture of corruption.

A project or building can be securely recognised as being a product of corruption although the particular symptoms are not always immediate: clumsy detailing and poor construction quality are universal. This discrimination should not be mistaken for snobbery or a meretricious delight in the inefficacious or vulgar: there is a relationship between elements and products, in their interaction and material quality, that defines a certain formal consistency. It is this relationship that is a characteristic feature of a typological series.

Frequently a style or compositional system is applied to organise these elements (both programme and products) in the manner of Jean-Nicholas-Louis Durand, irrespective of the accuracy or appropriateness of the architectural image employed as a

model. Circumstance can often mean the object and language is at odds and works in juxtaposition to the surrounding context that it is beyond what might be described as believable, thus giving, by sharp difference, a 'rootedness' and coherency to the assembly.

This goes beyond the territory of serendipitous conjunctions and the grotesque collusions; at its rare best, by acting upon a type, there is a process that brings the elements of typology to a precise state that characterises a singular work. There can also be unintended quality, in some way a primary condition of Architecture, where type is distinguished from model (something with formal features that permits repetition) that give the work a cohesive and singular strength. Indeed this confident coherency means some buildings which could, at face value, be understood as alien and offensive to their context become more acceptable and normal than those that seek to be 'contextual' or iconic.

At the scale of the elements that coalesce within an architectural object there is a parallel to the open question of authenticity that occurs in the replacement of components during the lifetime of a building or restoration. Only a proportion of the elements that form a building may be original but nonetheless the architectural object retains heritage status through the image and idea of its conception. Similarly it matters less from where something is copied, rather that it can be copied and with each copy it becomes closer to something else with its own identity: an inexact copy is also somehow a faithful copy of the Starck lemon squeezer and everything that it represents.

The forces of corruption are a profound influence in the continued use and adaptation of existing buildings, irrespective of their heritage or nominal protected

status. Piecemeal additions and the application of imaginatively bereft 'contemporary' styling are united by their low quality and self-confident character, and yet are intriguing homogeneous and are readily absorbed by the whole. Indeed these additions often reinforce a set of formal relations that strive towards a level of generality and anonymity that can characterise architecture as a discipline. The application and addition of these new languages and elements to a building are unified by an attitude of short-term economy, for example layer-upon-layer of ever cheaper proprietary ceiling systems or virus like infestations of exposed plastic conduit. The frequent misleading justification given, that they are only temporary, on one hand admits that they are not part of the recognised architectural object and on the other that there is a process of change and that the building and the additions themselves must adapt in the future and by implication are part of the whole.

A common characteristic in an architecture of corruption is the co-option of specialist objects for universal applications for which they are primarily unsuited or the use of products that offer to solve a perceived problem or specialisation that does not exist. Indeed a known yet ill-suited standardised system or disproportionately expensive product or material is often favoured, not only because of the potential for personal financial benefit, but because limited emotional or technical investment that is required. The resulting discordant language and inexact relationship between elements is a key characteristic of the typological series. In some way there is a corresponding generosity that helps to free the components and assembly from a limiting instrumental logic and allowing each element to solve both a problem and have a value in themselves. This is central to the indeterminate nature of the typology where the architect is not necessarily

able to define the project outcome but can employ the rules that operate in a corrupt project within a framework of typology: an outwardly innovative or efficient solution, one that is non-standard, is unlikely to be implemented.

This idea of indeterminacy acknowledges Rayner Banham's theme of 'furniturisation' of elements in the modern world and the openness of objects for varied interpretation; the gap between intention of self-effacing service, at its simplest, and the accidental or designed communicative possibility. It is the very fact that little conforms to a platonic ideal of technology – objects as human intention given perfect form, causing the minimum of friction between intention and fulfilment – that everyday objects are appropriated.³ The objects that, like Banham's chair, do not perform a singular task with humility, nor are they constrained to one message or means of communication, provide a fertile territory for investigation.

In the face of corruption the idea of an architecture that aims to assemble these contrasting components, each with their own distinct meanings and communicative identities, must address how they meet to form spaces or buildings to communicate a complex message that is rich with possibility and doubt. This is an architecture of curation yet with key pieces not necessarily known or never to be actually present. It does not rely upon products, specification or material quality but one that works within a typology where there is a very particular relationship between elements and the cultural and communicative quality of the ensemble. The task is to bring them together as a complex, if contradictory whole. This is not a contemporary architecture that is inextricably linked with a linear design narrative that can be said to follow the framework of a joke.⁴ That is to say that the resolution of the narrative is

contained within the reflexive function of the punchline and that the result justifies the process; there will be a meaningful resolution, no matter how shaggy the dog might be.

By accepting substitution, poor construction and coordination within a larger, more precise architectural conceptual framework of typology, with an emphasis on spatial intensity, it is possible to achieve an architecture of quality. In understanding the realities and rules of the game a detail design and workable collaboration can be fostered that can accommodate individual and isolated 'design development' (for a variety of reasons often unrelated to the actual project) by those involved without losing the idea of opportunity and imagination. A sense of presence that operates without the certainty of specification and immediate legibility, approximate as in craft practise yet using elements that are the result of a precise repetition found in industry.

In Richard Sennett's essay discussing Manet's 'A Bar at the Folies-Bergère' he describes how the selective and distorted reflections in the mirror behind the barmaid underline the dynamic sense of tension and dislocation prevalent in the condition of being both an observer and participant.⁵ He likens this condition of feeling 'ill at ease' as similar to being a foreigner, outside of the familiar and consequently negotiating the desire for assimilation against illusory and somewhat romantic notions of home and the known. It is precisely the awkwardness of displacement and the reflexive value created that gives new capacity and opportunity to make something humane and positive.

We are not a Russian architectural practice but lived and worked in Moscow for six years focussing on public funded education and cultural projects. We were alien to

both the context and practises in which we worked; daily experiencing an antonymous relationship that fuelled an instructive and creative friction based on unexpected observations paired with a precise and deep-seated doubt. In reaction to the difficulties of working with public projects in Russia the emphasis of our work focussed on the spatial generosity and delight that can be created rather than material specification or workmanship.

There is an identifiable typology that is the result of corruption and it is theoretically possible to bring the elements of this typology or formal structure into a precise state of a singular piece of architecture that brings both generosity and delight. Nonetheless, all of our projects in Russia, have to various degrees, been a failure. Ultimately we have realised, it is not possible to work without acknowledging the system and, even if without material benefit, becoming part of the mechanism of corruption. It is not possible to pursue any meaningful attitude or approach that seeks to find an architecture of Bravoure without the support of political influence and those clients are, by definition, deeply meshed within a self-defeating system.

Bardakhanova Champkins architects is an Anglo-Russian practice, international in outlook, working in Europe, Russia and the United Kingdom. Our working practice can be uncomfortable and often difficult, requiring continued appraisal of accepted normative in both design approach and professional methodology. This is a positive challenge that helps generate generosity, dignity and delight in all projects irrespective of scale, and in particular, genuine value for our clients and their public.

The practice is founded on over 18 years professional experience in the design and delivery of award winning buildings in London and elsewhere. Nicholas was awarded the Rome Prize in Architecture in 2009 and is a regular guest critic and also an examiner in professional practice on behalf of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The partners have been house architects for the past five years for the significant constructivist Zil Cultural Centre in Moscow (Vesnin Brothers, 1938).

2015-2017 studio: Anastasia Balykina, Irina Bardakhanova, Nicholas Champkins, Sonya Chebotareva, Evgenya Larkina, Grigorii Tsebrenko, Vera Zamashchikova and Natalia Zhernakova.

¹ architecten de vlyder vinck taillieu, doorzon interieurarchitecten, Filip Dujardin, ed., "Bravoure Scarcity Beauty," (Brussels: Flanders Architecture Institute, 2016, 133)

² Rafael Moneo, "On Typology," *Oppositions*, MIT Press, 13 (Summer 1978)

³ Neil Cummings, "Look at me, Look at me, Look at me," *Architectural Design*, Vol 72 No 4 (July 2002)

⁴ Mark Talbot, "BIG joke," *Project Journal* accessed 16th October, 2017, <http://projectjournal.org/category/readings/>

⁵ Richard Sennett, *The Foreigner*, two essays on exile (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011)

VDNKh Knowledge Park, Moscow

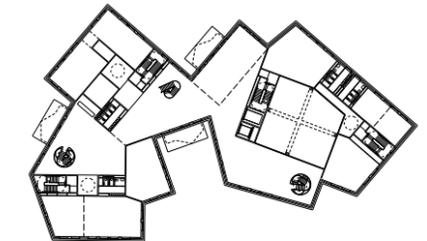
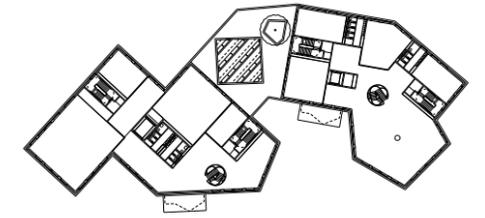


The rigid and formal layout of the Vystavka Dostizheniy Narodnogo Khozyaystva (Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy) is defined by exuberant Stalinist buildings and strict axial arrangements delineated by later piecemeal and somewhat aloof structures. After developing a comprehensive masterplan for part of the site, covering 83 existing buildings and over 900 trees, the first stage is a new creative education campus comprising of five new and six existing buildings within a new public landscape and infrastructure. This phase is due to be completed summer 2018.

The latent yet reticent character for the Knowledge Park site, with several protected heritage buildings and restrictive below ground services layout, provides a distinct spatial structure and aspect that each new building must address. The adjusted and inflective massing aims to create an ensemble piece that encloses an enfilade of loose landscape courts with views across and between them and the social, informal learning, exhibition and commercial spaces within each building. Furthermore the distorted and mannerist

layout allows teaching spaces, workshops and laboratories to have multiple views while service cores let onto each room.

The architectural language of the buildings and landscape is deliberately loose and general with an emphasis on a generosity of spirit and scale and can adjust to the vagaries of the Russian approach to procurement and construction. The simple pigmented mineral render facades either have a combed or dimpled surface finish with a precast concrete ribbon separating the piano nobile teaching spaces from the public and commercial spaces below. Above the 'tutti-frutti' artificial marble decorative panel with concealed ventilation perforations, the one very particular element in the project, a muscular transom give the facade a staccato rhythm.



Top: 1:25 scale study model investigating the dimpled render and tripartite window facade

Bottom: 1:200 scale site masterplan and massing model with key existing mature trees (part)

Right: First floor plan of each new building, with loose constellations of specialist and teaching rooms organised around sinuous social and informal learning space.

Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences



The double height volume of a disused Brezhnev-era cinema, grafted above a pre-revolutionary building close to Red Square, presents the opportunity to create a suite of new library, research and teaching spaces for a young and progressive university as part of wider refurbishment project. A two-storey and structurally ambiguous intervention, defined by a reading of the layout below, organises the primary volume with informal study spaces and meeting rooms sheltering below a more introspective research suite above. The library will be complete for the 2018/19 academic year.

The positive constraints of project budget and procurement methodology demands emphasis to the formal and spatial relationships between constituent parts rather than a concern for material or construction detail. Existing structural elements are retained and integrated within a new design language of simple fabricated steel components and furniture. Above the chaste perimeter shelving and hard plastered window reveals a thick application of acoustic plaster recalls the ambiance of Asplund's Stockholm City library.

Opposite page, top: A generous research room holds the threshold between the reception spaces and reading room. Beyond this a steel framed staircase resolves the change in level to the adjacent teaching building.

Opposite page, bottom: The concealed suite of reading spaces, almost Baroque in layout, is formed by large bookshelf elements that are given a homogeneous and indistinct materiality with a thick application of gloopy epoxy paint.

