

## Architecture as a lie

Slowly but surely, the topic of virtually every social debate has shifted from the question of who is right to the question of who lied. Gone are the ideological debates about the truth of one or another world view and the irrevocable course of events that follows on from that. In a totally mass-mediated world, it is much more interesting to broach the scandalous reverse of such issues and in particular to pursue the lie with which someone has tried to gain an advantage. The media are constantly helping people to spread lies only to turn around and unmask them as liars. A veritable *perpetuum mobile* of double dealing. Whereas six months ago Saddam Hussein was portrayed as an arch deceiver, unscrupulously pulling the wool over the eyes of the free world, now those who were most vociferous in making such accusations are themselves the targets of attacks on their personal integrity. Whereas the Iraqi weapons experts were supposed to testify to the true nature of the Ba'ath regime, now it is the West's own weapons experts who are the whistle-blowers, embarrassing those in power with their letters to the editor or lunches with journalists. So universal has the phenomenon become that it is rapidly losing its dramatic impact. This much is certain: the lie rules. But its rule is wholly democratic.

It seems almost impossible that architecture could reflect this situation. Not only is it by definition a truth as solid as a house, but it also rests on a decades-old tradition that prides itself on being honest and transparent. A building must be sincere, must be functionally and structurally straightforward. But when you stop to think about it, it is obvious that this tradition has had its day. Buildings seldom represent their contents any more. The construction is preferably hidden from sight. Transparency is out. In an age when buildings are chiefly required to 'emanate' a particular atmosphere and to conjure experiences, the criterion is not honesty but effect. And that is precisely what characterizes the lie, too.

Is this a bad thing? Is it all right to lie? If you put it like that, a majority of people would answer no. Yet that same majority is constantly in search of justifications for lying and it is advisable to be familiar with the taxonomy. Just what are the excuses for lying?

Firstly there is the excuse that it wasn't meant to be taken seriously; it was just a joke. It's an argument we often encountered in postmodern architecture at the end of the last century. Okay, so it's fake, but it's an amusing fake, isn't it.

Secondly there is the excuse that the liar wasn't aware of lying, was in fact misled by others. This is the argument advanced by a president who mistakenly makes a bellicose State of the Union speech because his security advisers have neglected to prevent him from doing so. In architecture we come across this variant in the countless designers who have been preoccupied in recent years with infrastructure projects predicated on target figures that will never be achieved.

Thirdly there is the excuse of those who appeal to a higher principle. Like a prime minister who invokes history which will eventually prove him right. And in architecture, all those projects which may be glorified set-building, but set-building that 'the people' or 'the market' want and hence all in a good cause.

But when the lie is truly democratized, something else happens as well. Two more arguments get an airing. First, the observation that everybody else is doing it, so why not me? This is the daily cynicism familiar to everyone in the Netherlands

since the exposure of the big construction industry fraud. Indeed this is the construction fraud of price fixing and secret consultations aimed at receiving more money than is justified by the quality of the work done.

The second and final argument is that people lie because no one really cares. This is the most advanced form of lying because the deceit is barely detectable any more. If everyone lies, that is the truth. In the long run there ceases to be a touchstone against which to test the lie. Call it a special kind of paradigm shift. You might discern it in an architectural practice that has abandoned all pretence of a disciplinary core, in the something-for-everyone architecture of the universal catalogue.

If this is the cultural road we are travelling, what then is the value of history? In the form of material heritage it remains the touchstone doesn't it? It allows the truth to surface via documents, doesn't it? That surely is the assumption on which the study of history is based? Of course, but it can equally well provide the building blocks of one big happy historical confidence trick. We are entering the arena of historical reconstruction...



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