Archis is Open Source, a preamble

It is a world of Davids and Goliaths. Of Linux versus Microsoft. Of Open Cola versus the Coca Cola Company. Of Napster versus Sony. Giant corporations are threatened, sometimes even defeated by the ingenuity of individuals, hackers and idealists, whizz-kids who use the Internet to frustrate or neutralize the self-appointed dispensers of culture. In the new, 'user-to-user' culture there is less and less reason to be dependent on the old intermediaries and middlemen, on the gigantic organizations that have amassed a fortune from the sale of rights, licences and specialist know-how. In their stead we are seeing the emergence of 'light' systems that are never finished, mutants that are constantly adapting to a changing environment, temporary set-ups that are relevant to specific moments in time. It is an age in which parties or protests can be organized with one click of the Send button. In which local communities are linked by e-mail or news groups to globally active groups of like-minded people, in which 'light' airlines hire aircraft on the basis of bookings, in which capital flows to whatever spot will give it the best return for now. Open source, a term borrowed from software engineering, has become the magic formula for a culture of rapid give and take, of the ad hoc accumulation of know-how, money and energy for the benefit of a single, concrete task. Open source has no head office, no logo and no shareholders. But it does have a great many interested parties. Instead of obstructing one another with old ownership structures, they break down the barriers in a spirit of universal intellectual solidarity.

Ever since its emergence as idea and practice, open source has been surrounded by an aura of liberation. It is the culture of free spirits, who no longer acknowledge the power and authority of the old dinosaurs and who forge their own links to their public and supporters. At the same time, however, one can discern in this movement an echo of the jungle, of a free-for-all in which nothing is certain any more and nothing is what it seems. The only thing that counts is whether something works. This open source is the society that follows the disintegration of stable leadership, an open sesame where everyone grabs what they can: from national heritage, from state property, from the public realm, from public morality, from art and science, from pension funds, from savings, in short from everything that until that moment was safeguarded by inviolable rules. Open source in this latter sense is an open invitation to the vultures and jackals who are always lurking in the wings to plunder the carcass of society. Open source: the global triumph of opportunism of one kind or another in which nothing is sacred any more, everything is profane. The final stage of capitalism.

Architecture would seem to have little to do with all this. After all, how can it be opportunistic? Architecture, surely, is enclosure, territory, it occupies a place. And as long as it is able to deny entry to that place to unauthorized outsiders, its material integrity is assured, isn't it? Yet in architecture, too, there is a growing realization that it is more and more about situations than places. More and more about processes than objects. And these situations and processes are by definition temporary and thus a lot more susceptible to the law of the strongest and the cleverest. This applies equally to the design process, where the result is more than ever down to a combination of all kinds of skills and know-how, a pooling of many different talents, and it is only in the public reception that it is still seen as the work of a single creative genius. Indeed, the strongest and the cleverest. And then of course there is the architecture of all those people who live according to the spirit of open source: buildings that can stripped down and taken with you, buildings whose turn-around time is reduced to a minimum, whose very design is predicated on impermanence. This architecture has no core, no unique signature and no copyright. Thus we see that the profession is an arena for a huge clash between what some welcome as a new openness and others deplore as ruthless disciplinary Darwinism.

How is one to represent such a world? How to write about it? And how to mediate it? Archis itself aspires to be open source and cannot stop exploring its modalities. An issue in the spirit of research...

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Editorial