

2009

## An Ecology of Design.

### A Postscript to 'The Architecture of Continuity' (2009) by Lars Spuybroek

Let's be clear about it first: I am totally fascinated by Lars Spuybroek's works. They are beautiful, fragile en breathtaking. Take a look for instance at the Son-O-House or his renderings of Hidden Lives and Whispering Garden – examples of wonderful design, shaped in an organic and environmental fashion, making you re-appreciate your habitat, or better: the ecosystem we *are* and *live in*. Yes, this is ecology, permitting me to use notions like awesome in its proper historical context: once only revelations of God or Nature were allowed to be called awesome. Being a professional art worker, I hardly ever use notions like beautiful or awesome – art is much more than plain aesthetics and we have moved far beyond categories like the sublime. However, I would like to make an exception for Lars, since he has put aesthetics back on the ethical map. That is why he was my number one last year when I teamed up in a jury, appointed to select a Dutch artist for an important art award. Unfortunately, he didn't even make it to the second round. "Sorry, he's not an artist", the posse replied.

In this postscript I would like to elaborate on the notion of empathy, within the larger context of the ecology of design. By doing so, I will introduce two controversies, hopefully lightening up the urgency of the topics we are discussing here.

"We have been ripped off by modernism and postmodernism", Lars Spuybroek remarked in a conversation on 'The Aesthetics Of Variation'. Then he leaps back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, calling himself 'almost a neo-Gothic', since he wants to make clear he's re-evaluating the Gothic tradition: that splendid marriage between architecture and art, between structure and ornament, between geometry and organics, between religion and variation, between science and life. Where there's no gap between life and matter, Spuybroek argues, there's no distinction between the natural and the artificial. He talks about an aesthetics of matter, however, I would prefer the notion: an aesthetics of life that matters. After all, his aesthetics relate deeply to all living things and all relations between them - all relations are felt relations. Spuybroek wants to carry John Ruskin's 'lamp of life': we see, therefore we feel – and because we feel, we act. The Gothic dream cherished an architecture that was consciously employed for no less an object than the elevation and evolution of man and life. Spuybroek's relational aesthetics also seems perfectly in tune with Spinoza's monism, with its notion of the oneness of *natura naturata* (or *naturing nature*) and *natura naturans* (or *natured nature*). Life itself *is* and *produces* life at the same time.

Spuybroek accepts this proposition rightly as a call for empathy, or to stick to the theme of tonight's event, as a plea for an ecology of design. According to Spinoza, empathy is shared love, based on an intellectual and felt understanding of the world as an interconnected web of causal relationships. Empathy is the capacity to really enjoy the happiness of the other and to really understand the sorrows of the other. All is affect and feeling. Empathy requires a loving and feeling intellect.

In his book *The Architecture of Continuity* (2008) Spuybroek criticizes modern architecture for not being capable of empathy, that is, for not being able to understand order and contingency in an ontological relationship, as producing each other. By understanding life and matter strictly as form, and not as interconnected patterns of organisation, as rhythms, modern architecture has killed variation and replaced it by repetition.

The notion of empathy touches an exciting debate about architecture and modern culture, raised by computer scientist and mathematician Nikos Salingaros. The events of 9/11 have

caused a watershed in architectural history, Salingaros argues. The attack on the World Trade Center by terrorist Mohammad Atta, who also happened to be professional urban planner, learned that “the West has come identified with a nihilistic architecture whose hegemony has erased humane built form around the world”. As we have come to learn, Atta’s master thesis handled the subject of desecration of traditional Islamic cities by modernist architecture and planning. Indeed, he felt ripped off by modernism and post-modernism. Like Spuybroek, Salingaros favours earlier movements. He begs architects to carry the lamp of life again, he begs for empathy: “we have a moral responsibility to practice a humane architecture and urbanism”.

As an expert on complexity theory, Salingaros accuses architecture since Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus of replacing diversity and variation by geometrical fundamentalism, repetition and replication. In his eyes, modern and post-modern architecture should not be seen as a science or an art form, but as a cult and an ideology; as propaganda - lacking feeling, empathy and consequently, any understanding of the world. As a result, Salingaros continues in his essay *A Missed Learning Opportunity* (2002), “the Third World feels a rage towards modernist architecture and urban models we have introduced to their countries, which have destroyed their built heritage”. His argument is fuelled by writer Eric Darton, who wrote a biography of the World Trade Center ten years ago. In an intriguing postscript, written shortly after 9/11 and entitled *The Janus Face of Architectural Terrorism* (2002), Darton investigates a number of comparisons between the lives and careers of Mohammad Atta and World Trade Center chief architect Minoru Yamasaki. He reaches the conclusion that both the building and destruction should be seen as enactments of polarized daydreams of domination. He calls for an architecture that moves forward differently, into a world in which abstract thoughts become a function of our integrative capacities and where we plan *ourselves* into our structures. In other words, empathic architecture.

The notion of empathy also responds to another debate, this time within the design community, and is sometimes referred to as ‘designism’ – named after the annual convention of a New York design community. The word ‘designer’ has become so debased that many companies and designers have banned the word from their ads and websites. They are motivated by the idea that we are on the verge of a revulsion against manufacturing design, that we live in a world drowning in objects, and that we have come to realize how close our greedy habits of consumption have brought us to the limits of the world’s resources. The response has been twofold, Fiona McCarthy writes in her *Guardian* article ‘Shallow Objects of Desire’ (2008). Some designers tear down all distinctions between design and art: they only produce very small numbers of precision-made objects. Another, more exciting school of thought, questions the need to develop new products. Why not take existing archetypes and just refine them. Again, empathy is a key notion in the controversy – how do we really want to relate to the world?

In an enlightening book, *The Language of Things* (2008), Deyan Sudjic describes his addiction to design products and how his feelings of uneasiness and guilt have grown over the years. Sudjic is the director of the Design Museum in London and architecture critic for the *Observer*. In his book, he asks himself: what do we really value? He finally comes up with an answer: the greatest form of luxury would be the relief of not living with so much stuff. Or in McCarthy’s words: “We are piling up our houses with ostentatious objects, thinking they will make us better people, more lovable and human. What fools have we become”.

It is not a coincidence that Fiona McCarthy discerns echo’s of the Arts and Crafts Movement in contemporary discussions. Fifteen years ago she wrote a wonderful biography of William Morris. Morris believed in the creation of things of lasting beauty, to be passed on to later generations; he believed in ideals of permanent value; in materials and objects that would mature over the years. Yes, he carried Ruskin’s lamp of life. Lars Spuybroek also aims at this architecture of delicacy. “I totally believe in a Digital Arts and Crafts Movement”, he proudly

confesses in *The Architecture of Continuity*. We have become totally entangled in a semiotic web in which our relationship with the object has been dissolved. What fools have we become. That is why we need to restore that relationship, Spuybroek says. However, if we take a close look at his quote, he is not aiming at another, updated version of the Arts and Crafts Movement – he is digitalizing the version. In music this process of hyper-reflectivity is called ‘dub’.

In dub, low frequency modulation – or basslines, create spatial territories – they are the ordinates on a new map. Where melody pulls you in, the bass pushes you out. Beats in dub are not used for rhythmic support, however, they are supposed to explore that spatial realm – they are the co-ordinates on the map. By adding echo or delay, it is not the beat that is stressed, but the spatial holes between them. Every new beat produces a desire for the next black hole. The result is an interconnected architecture: where you expect rhythm, you get space; where you expect space, you get rhythm. Instead of listening to things in the outside world, you will find yourself present within an immanent sonic environment. This is not modernism, this is bass culture. According to writer Kodwo Eshun, dub is an ecological medium. The creator and the object have become one – dub is the Digital Arts and Crafts Movement par excellence. The fact that Lars frequently works with sound artist Edwin van der Heide seems to strengthen this notion and practice of interconnectedness.

To summarize my postscript: an ecology of design starts with empathy and with a confession: what fools have we become. The answer is stunningly simple: let’s fall in love with the world again - not the world *of* the beats, but with the worlds *between* the beats.