

Crazy Name, Crazy Building: Madonna's Bra, the Pregnant Oyster and other peculiar buildings

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The difficult and mysterious subject of the popular reception of architecture is illustrated by the eventful early life of the new theatre in Ilfracombe, North Devon, designed by Tim Ronalds Architects. With its two brick cones 20m high, it is a radical design, especially so for a seaside town which had seen no public building for more than fifty years. After numerous presentations to different groups in the community, the town was divided into more or less equal groups in favour of and against the scheme. The battle of imagery started: a butcher who supported the project started to make cone-shaped meat pasties; opponents compared the scheme to a power station.

Then the project acquired a name: 'Madonna's Bra'. I don't know if it was a pro- or anti- who thought of this resemblance, but one of the scheme's opponents wrote to the Daily Mail - generally considered the most reactionary of newspapers - pointing it out. They latched onto the story enthusiastically, applying the rule of thumb controversy + sex = news. It is unlikely that they approved of the project, but they couldn't resist a smirk in retelling the story, titling the article 'The Bra Pavilions'. The whole thing was so redolent of those 'saucy seaside' postcards where implausibly buxom women and rake-thin men exchange double entendres. And so the name 'Madonna's Bra' stuck. It is not often that Ilfracombe is mentioned in the national press, and it seems that the people of the town quite liked the attention. Advocates of the scheme had argued that it would raise the profile of this faded seaside resort: the controversy had already succeeded in doing this. When the project was put to the vote in a public meeting, a clear majority voted in favour. The building is now open to the public, its generous spaces, raw materiality and walk-all-over roof apparently appreciated by large numbers of visitors. But this story isn't simply about hostility overcome: more than that, it's about the popular perception of a building, manifest through its name. The official name is 'the Landmark, Ilfracombe', but people still know it as 'Madonna's Bra'.

Mockery and alienation

Many buildings attract nicknames: most of them seem to be modern. This is probably because of their unfamiliar nature: Modernism aimed to subvert

the established hierarchies of architectural language, and expand the range of expression beyond the domestic (familiar through scale) and the conventionally monumental (culturally transmitted). Many buildings from the Modernist period achieved these aims all too successfully: quite literally, they were like no other building that people knew. When we don't recognize something, we intuitively try to grasp its nature by seeking resemblances: what is it like? we ask. And we find reference points close to hand: objects from everyday life, images from popular culture.

As often as not, the names reflect a degree of hostility, or alienation. There is a student building in Cambridge by a well-known architect of the '60s, which has that stepped section of classic modernist pedigree, each room having a small terrace on the roof of the room below. With the entry to the block through a car park straight out of Piranesi's Carceri (in the undercroft below the rooms), it is not a popular building, and is universally known as 'The Typewriter'. Other names have a more mocking character, either derisive, like 'Paddy's Wigwam' for Basil Spence's Roman Catholic cathedral in Liverpool, or just deflating, like 'the Armadillo' for Norman Foster's clumsy tribute to Sydney Opera House in Glasgow. But this phenomenon is not exclusively related to the products of modernist architecture. In ancient Rome, the emperor Hadrian explored the symbolism of the dome, seeking a cosmological justification for imperial rule - and was mocked by the people of Rome, who likened his domes (amongst them the Pantheon) to the distinctly un-cosmic pumpkin.

In Ilfracombe itself, there is an earlier instance of a nickname for a new building. In the 1880s, a long, low glass pavilion was built on the seafront, a pale imitation of the Crystal Palace more than thirty years after the Great Exhibition. Built at the time of the Queen's Golden Jubilee, it was named 'the Victoria Pavilion' - but people called it 'The Cucumber Frame'.

But a mocking name for a building can also indicate a degree of affection, however mixed it is with antipathy. The most truly loathed buildings don't even get a nickname - for it is generally the soullessness, the absence of character,

that alienates most completely. Equally, the worst tyrants are not mocked because of their public buildings, as Hadrian was, but receive more direct attention - consider Osip Mandelstam's (fateful) poem comparing Stalin's moustache to a caterpillar.

Interestingly, it is in Berlin, that city which over the last century has been most deeply afflicted by History with a capital H, that we come across a proliferation of mocking names. The Allied airforces cleared the way, the Bundesrepublik pumped in the subsidies, and the architects obliged those who wished to escape the gravitational pull of history, creating an assortment of weird and wonderful buildings.

Scharoun's Philharmonie, built in the wasteland by the Wall, with its angular forms and plunging roof, became known as 'Zirkus Karajani' - Karajan's Circus Tent (after Herbert von Karajan, Goering's protege, subsequently conductor/maestro to this orchestra). The Congress Hall in the Tiergarten, the auditorium sandwiched between two curved planes, was nicknamed 'The Pregnant Oyster'. While the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, the bombed-out shell of a 19th-century Gothic lump preserved in its ruined form at the West end of the Tiergarten, is apparently known as 'The Rotten Tooth', the modernist church beside it, a low octagonal volume with a slim hexagonal belltower, both in glass block, is called 'the Lipstick and Powder Puff'. Visible on the other side of the wall, the DDR's sci-fi telecommunications tower in Alexanderplatz, a giant needle with a spherical volume beneath its tip, is called 'Telespargel', or 'TV Asparagus'.

It is as if the burden of the past is shrugged off by emphasizing the mundanity and absurdity of the present, turning the large denomination banknotes of official aspiration into the small change of popular. One thing is clear about the post-war monuments of West Berlin: they were not designed as frivolous post-modern jests, but were built by conscientious, serious-minded architects with an agenda of anti-monumentalism and formal exploration. Popular humour is extremely difficult to court, and is certainly not something that can be fabricated. Like a pushy telephone sales representative, with their

excessively familiar manner, what grates most about many post-modernist buildings is that they presumptuously state their communicativeness, without ever earning our trust or respect through their basic values. Is it perhaps the case that modernist object buildings are actually ambiguous, playful and linguistically open, whereas post-modernist buildings which have been designed to appeal, to communicate, are closed and deterministic?

Shock archeology

Contrasting perspectives on this question are given in the early and late work of Claes Oldenburg. In a series of collages done in the late '60s, Oldenburg presented postcard views of major public spaces in London, their monuments replaced by giant everyday objects: Trafalgar Square with a gearstick in place of Nelson's column; Piccadilly Circus with a cluster of colourful lipsticks instead of the fountain and statue of Eros. At one level, these are engagingly irreverent fantasies, a challenge to the starched, anaemic world of bourgeois public representation: with a double-edged wit common to Pop Art, the images state 'these are our gods, our icons now', an ambivalent salute to the liberating, destabilizing and absurd world of consumerism.

At another level, there is a more direct substitution, an updating of iconography: so, in the century of mechanized war, in which man is subsumed into tank, bomber or submarine, the gearstick contains an element of threat which the martial figure of the admiral no longer possesses; if the coy statue of the boy Eros is emblematic of the Victorians' repressed attitude to sex, lipstick is a powerful image of modern women's more confident, assertive sexuality, the lipstick holder having a compelling iconic quality of its own, with its mix of blood colour and phallic shape.

So these early collages by Oldenburg are a form of shock archaeology, scraping away the ornaments of the bourgeois city to reveal the Freudian themes of death and sex. But, as images, they engage with the imagery, the collective and individual imagination of the city. What, then, thirty years on, are we to make of Oldenburg's success as a public artist, when he has managed to build a number of sculptures monumentalizing domestic objects?

I'm thinking of the binoculars which form the entry to the Gehry building in Santa Monica, or the book of matches the which stands in a housing estate in the Val d'Hebron in Barcelona, the giant clothes peg I can't remember where. I've only seen these in photographs, but I can't help wondering if these realized sculptures carry the same subversive, revealing quality as the simple collages, concocted with postcards, magazine cuttings and glue.

Do these monuments to the mundane convey anything either mysterious or threatening? Deprived of the formal pomp of imperial London, the irruption of the everyday (in the form of lipstick, gearstick, whatever) loses much of its impact. With no earlier reading to challenge, are they able to represent anything other than themselves? If anything, they stand as testimony to the poverty of understanding on the part of the developers and architects whose non-places these sculptures of the mundane are intended to rescue from mundanity - a post-modern irony indeed. Oldenburg is an artist of considerable wit and insight, but has he not here fallen victim to the commercial processes which Pop Art sardonically, ambivalently celebrated, the infant Pop Art devoured by the Saturn of commercialism?

Unvarnished modernity

I use the example of Oldenburg to point up the yawning gap between the way cities are perceived and the way they are created. Popular perception is quick, coarse, absurdist, resilient but suspicious, expressed in the language of the pub or the street. Buildings express power, ownership and identity at a variety of levels, many of them subliminal. So making buildings and bits of cities is by necessity more awkward, serious, oblique.

In the course of the last decade or so, much work has been done to explore the way the city is imagined and perceived. Much of it has started from Walter Benjamin's rich and perceptive investigations into the late 19th-, early 20th-century city. As a corrective to the perceived modernist project to erase the imaginative qualities of the city - to get a handle on what we already have, the imagery we have inherited, before we replace it with something of uncertain value - this has undoubtedly been valuable. Some writers have sought to

extend this perspective to the buildings and cities of the recent past, but the analysis and understanding of the modernist city as actually built - as opposed to knee-jerk condemnation on the basis of a couple of images from the Ville Radieuse - has far to go. We need to understand modernity as it is and has been experienced, with an anthropological mix of detachment and empathy, taking the noisy rhetoric of justification and resistance as a part, but only a part, of the phenomenon.

Above all, it is necessary to have a lucid understanding of the context in which the city is made - I mean the consumer revolution, the globalization of the economy, the industrialization of the building industry and capitalization of development - and of the means at our disposal to operate within this. The latter would require a clear distinction to be made between the character that can be bestowed on a place by its many creators (architects included) and the life, and imaginative life, this place subsequently develops. Too many urban projects, many of them built, are vitiated by a romanticism that seeks to anticipate (or simulate) a popular inhabitation that will never come, because the roots of that life have been cut off. Privatization of services and places, brutal forces of economic competition: we can resist and counterbalance these processes only when we have a clear and unromanticised understanding of the vigour and complexity of today's urban experience.

As I have suggested, the key to the Ilfracombe theatre and the Berlin buildings referred to above is their genuinely democratic, open quality and anti-authoritarian stance. I suspect we would all like to make a building, a place in the city, which was held in popular affection, even getting its own humorous name. But before this is likely to happen, we must get the essentials right, striving to achieve the same generous spirit of buildings like these: we can then leave the rest to the popular imagination, to express either love or hate - or a mixture of the two.