Weird Realism
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There's nothing worse for the architect than the phrase, "That's not realistic." That simple phrase can be a shorthand for many things: it's too costly, it looks structurally unsound, it won't work with the program, no one will know how to build it, etc. However, the most interesting version of why something seems unrealistic is this one: "It looks weird." In other words, the proposed architecture doesn't reflect how reality should look.

Ever since the publication of Immanuel Kant's <u>Critique of Pure Reason</u>, but perhaps long before that as well, we've had reasons to doubt the mind's ability to possess absolute knowledge. Even in antiquity, Plato describes our fate as one where we're stuck in a world of shadows, doomed to never see things as they are. What's interesting to me is that this has never been fully digested by our practices—all of which are built on assumptions about what constitutes the real. This is where philosophy becomes very valuable for questioning some of these assumptions. We will always have to assume some things about the real, but sometimes, our assumptions become too static and unproductive. Sometimes we need the real to change.

If in fact we have no access to the thing itself, whatever we think the real is pertains more to how we think the real should look, rather than what it is in an absolute sense. Because of this, there is a representational problem with regard to the real, and this is where I think architecture is at its best. There is no other human practice that is so much about the problem of the real. Architecture is the first thing that tells us what reality looks like.

What I think we need is a weird realism. We need an architecture that is completely devoted to the problem of the real, but one that is aware of its uncertainty. In the sixties, when utopian architecture was privileged, I think the strategy was very different. The strategy was to locate the radical architectural project in the world of the not-real, and from there, throw rocks at the real. The intent was to construct new fantasies, believing that reality had become intractable and impossible to confront. The new fantasies would form new desires that would then subvert the real—our actions would change. It is no coincidence that Lacan had such a huge influence during that time. I think this strategy fails during late capital for two reasons. First, late capital depends on constructed fantasies to distract attention away from what is instrumental. The perpetual construction of utopias is already a condition of our real. The strategy has been thoroughly appropriated by governing institutions. Second, and more importantly, the construction of fantasies, or the not-real, assumes that the real is concrete, when the real is actually abstract. I think this is an unintended consequence of utopian strategies. They strangely reinforce the real that we already know.

Given the failures of utopian architecture, the response cannot be a surrender to the normal, the everyday, and critical anti-aesthetic practices. Some believe that it is best to accept the constraints of 'real' practice and somehow do some good from the inside (like an inside job bank robbery). I think this kind of idea overestimates the power of architectural intelligence to construct Trojan horses and ironically underestimates the power of architecture to directly produce a strange real without subterfuge. But more importantly, such a turn towards a naive realism has the same problem as utopianisms in assuming that there is a concrete real.

Like a person you've known for twenty years suddenly acting strangely, leading you to think, "I don't know who this person is," architecture at its best can do the same to the real. My favorite moments in architecture have been those astonishing moments when I thought to myself, "Wow, I didn't know the world could do that."