

Hockney's Window

(Life is a Beach)



This is the view from Rodin's apartment in Alberoni. It looks over the lagoon towards Mestre and Venice, and then on a clear day off towards the Dolomites. We have begun to call it the Hockney Window. For some reason it reminded me of *The Bigger Splash*, a painting by David Hockney from 1967. It was as if I was looking out into a huge swimming pool that went all the way to Venice. Everything at this one moment passed through everything else. I couldn't tell where one piece of art ended and another began. The same with books I'd read. I had even started to believe that phrase that used to be used at the end of the 20th Century; all buildings will begin to look like all other buildings. Is this a repertoire of architectural images? It's a virus. No it's a meme. Now it's a viral meme.



What then with ideas like the 'original', the 'copy', the replication? What about plagiarism, from Philip Johnson to Frank Gehry, from Bob Dylan to Van Morrison. Are we to lament the inspirations that the past makes to our present? And what if we use the term 'intertextuality' – does that cover a thousand sins or the natural process of dialoguing with other buildings, other works that exist in our cities, in our minds? "immature poets borrow; mature poets steal," T S Eliot writes in an essay on Philip Massinger (1920), "bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different." What about appropriation, assimilation or theft? Do these notions resonate, did they resonate in the past? Does theft exist in architecture today? Online trawling and architecture sites are so immediate and vast that it might be said they predict the work before it is even thought about. Especially for students.

Eliot also has something to say on theft: "The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that which it is torn." The connection to architecture hardly needs emphasizing; "the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion." Was this Frank Gehry's point? 98% of architecture is *pure shit*, thrown into something which has no cohesion. Was Gehry on the side of the good poet, the good architect? "A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest."

We have today internet precedents, interminable. We might see this as the image repertoire we used to glean from print, photographic record and collections. Archives and libraries presented slower processes but their presence was always there. But is this more serious today or has the scaremongering reached beyond the Twitter sphere and Blogosphere? No this repertoire is obvious; it is explicit. A repertoire, these viruses in the mind and of the mind exists at a click. These clicks may be, depending on how we respond to them, depending on what we are engaging in, short cuts to any number of architectures, any number of buildings with any number of forms, solutions, anti-solution. As far as we can tell it will never exhaust itself. Even spectacular architecture!

When Frank Gehry took umbrage at the reporter's hinting at 'showy' architecture, and responded with the finger, did he not miss a trick? Forgetting the work of previous architects is a way architecture continues. Gehry will be no different and he is far from the first architect to use intuition, art and brilliant fidgeting – sometimes known as the creative process – to design buildings that can – even without squinting too much – appear versions of other works. Sometimes these works resemble his own works, sometimes the work of others. Sometimes they brand fragments to re-brand other fragments. Not to take anything away from the sophistication of these versions, the juggling of parametric software and algorithmic space does of course have the potential of re-producing its own internalised and replicated space.

Pattern recognition can be applied to architecture without much mystery. Pinterest and Instagram can research the repetition or the different. References to Deleuze and Guattari only take us so far inside our own skulls. This can lead to self-congratulation. Our internal mechanisms of source and reference keep us alive and, more than occasionally, blind. Works beget new works, forms beget new forms, the parametric shuffling and algorithmic architecture is both brilliant and often predictable. This is not mimicking design as much as reading small repetitions of master forms and spatial recognitions. Like pattern recognition and machine learning, it is this process that turns versions into new versions before they are recognizable.

How do we recognize the unrecognizable in contemporary architecture and does it really matter critically? If something is sufficiently branded it will encourage its own proliferation. What would designing for Luis Vitton mean? If we think this only affects the profiled architects (*starchitects* is irrelevant to this) we would be wrong. Research and design scholarship proceeds similarly; it re-brands ways of thinking to suit accepted clusters of happy or unhappy language and conceptual frameworks. Whether the result is called 'the spectacle', 'tourist porn' or then 'nothingness', it doesn't matter. Whether it involves architects in Statecraft or Extra-Statecraft it keeps the critical carnival going. Architects have long entered these voids of their own making, using a vocabulary – off and on - that supports both academic and professional bluster.

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I began to think of Rodin sitting there on the beach. Had he always considered architecture nothing more than a bad fiction with admirable but blind ambitions? Why do architects always think they can unravel good intentions for personal, social and human progress? Was this a reckless understanding that always seduced Rodin with relevance? Is that why he became a photographer and also opened a restaurant? Or was all this disenchantment, a symptom of aging architectural helplessness? Take the way he parked the black Volkswagen. Some would think this a reckless piece of parking. I thought it was quite creative. He reminded me of Mister Bean. So would it be the *Four Seasons Hotel*, buildings like these, that may embarrass our cities this century? Or will our urban landscapes change without us being able to keep up with the mutations before our very eyes?

If this was not a literary corruption, if this writing was not condemned to attempt to be entertaining, I'd leave out that phrase 'before our every eyes.' But there it is, it stands. The internet, the dark net, the internet of things; refuge, escape, virus? Intertextuality, a word, a mouthful, a history of plagiarism or clever stealing. Ezra Pound or T S Eliot. Immaturity and maturity. Survival. Or everything else but architecture. "What shocks me," Max Frisch writes in *Montauk* (1976 p.107) "is rather the discovery that I have been concealing my life from myself. I have been serving up stories to some sort of public, and in these stories I have, I know, laid myself bare – to the point of non-recognition. I live, not with my own story, but those parts of it that I have been able to put to literary use. Whole areas are missing."

This is where we need to interrupt with a small section about the meme and what is more useful to architecture, the meme machine? The latter is the title of a book by Susan Blackmore. Having said that we haven't so much forgotten the works and words of Richard Dawkins, the invention and idea of a cultural meme and Blackmore's extension. I would suggest as so often without any malice, that architects have merely been bystanders to the deeper debate. Rushing to promotion, podium and publication, many were just trying to understand their own repetition and difference when social media re-shaped the meme. Now internet/online memes replicate and disseminate the identifiable, the cliché and the appropriation. It has become acceptable commentary.

Just like Twitter has its moments, so do architects. It is not an idle observation. Many architects caught between practice and theory, design and reading, desire and language over the last 30 years have missed out whole areas of debate and discourse that - whether they believe it or not - condition the way they are designing, the way they move their own cognitive distortions into something still called architecture.

If we put in the word *memetics* into google the following comes up. "*Mimetic*" *redirects here*. *To mimesis*: Mimesis refers to the Ancient Greek *mimesis*, "to imitate", connecting us with (*mimos*) "imitator, actor". It carries a huge range of meanings both critically and philosophically. In architecture it is often paired with poesis/poetics and has been used to discuss issues around [imitation](#), [representation](#), originality, [mimicry](#), reception, similarity. For us here perhaps the most useful reduction of this would be the act of resembling and the act of expression. If we consider this part of the [presentation of the self](#), we move into difficult areas. The website then says: *Not to be confused with Memetics*.

A "multitude of sins"! There we go again. An unforgivable phrase in an architectural essay. In a recent book, *Why Dylan Matters*, the Classical scholar Richard F Thomas writes about the inner landscape that is within Dylan that emerges in song to song. From Classical, Italianate, Roman influence to the altered world. He makes a good case for this 'stealing' as he calls it. Though it is harder to wade through the muddy waters that offer citation, reference, allusion and echo to things in Dylan's past. It is obvious to Thomas theft is one of Dylan's major moves in song writing. Does it matter? The player, the imposter, the Jokerman all come together. Does it really tell us that much? There is one song – *Trying to get to Heaven* – from the album *Time Out of Mind* (1997) which the scholar considers Dylan to have stolen at least from 10 other songs, albeit brilliantly. Following T S Eliot's exploration of Messenger and Shakespeare there is an intriguing comparative riff on Dylan's song.

But this has nothing to do with mimetics. In architecture, especially education, proceeding to think out new work by responding to a 'precedent' covers a multitude of sins and inspirations. Some might say if something is too near something else in the past, it is plagiarism, a copy, some even go as far as saying it is theft, stealing. Allowing the licence we have when writing (can anyone control this?) I am going to invent the word *Memeticism*. Of course it is not an invention it is a pretence, but it does help us continue our discussion on the architectural image repertoire. Memetics here has more to do with what the world is within (ourselves) that we use to create. Whether a building, an exquisite dish or a song.

