

Spiralling Newness

Tibor Joanelly

Since Bruno Latour deconstructed Modernity with his seminal book *We Have Never Been Modern*, it has become extremely difficult to maintain any purposeful understanding of progress in terms of historical teleology. Of course, architecture cannot be excluded from the doubts surrounding the modern narrative sown both by anthropology and especially by the sociological research on technical sciences. As a Latourian I do not believe in progress as a sustainable society-shaping force. But I do believe in the extension or expansion of human knowledge and I believe in the agility of architecture to reinstitute old techniques by concept and to develop new technologies. Expansion, in terms of movement through time and space, is not linear: it does not follow a clearly defined timeline from past to future. Its trajectory, following Latour once more, may be of a circular nature, or to be more precise: it is plausible to describe it with the figure of a spiral that follows an extending circular curvature through time and space. By following the spiral's trajectory, one passes the past, but in another context and under different circumstances. Elements on the spiral can be, in time-space-relation, very close to each other or very far away, meaning that there is no progress or regression but only proximity and distance. Because of this, I am perhaps sceptical about progress in general. One just needs a glimpse at the development of man-

kind to see that the theory of progress is disputable. On a whole it is true that wealth, life expectancy and the like have increased, yet within our societies, complexity and inequality have also increased, leading us to a position of extreme vulnerability. The same holds for architecture. If one takes an undoubted increase in diversity and – why not? – mannerisms within our building culture as possible criteria for architectural quality, then a certain progress can be stated in relation to the openness of societies and the possibilities of expression for the individual. But these ideas, as well as architecture's metier, can be challenged, as there are no real common grounds in sight for gathering ideas. (An exception could be what Latour calls an "attractor of the terrestrial", but it may be too early to judge this issue yet.)

The problems arising with the notion of progress are also present within the idea of "innovation". Does architectural innovation exist? Of course, architecture may improve life and comfort by means of technical, spatial and functional innovations, but is architecture itself innovative? The question can only be answered positively if one takes the meaning of the word as "novelty" or, more neutrally, as an expression of renewal or change. However, I am sure that innovation cannot stand for "making architecture better".

An example? Christian Kerez's *House With a Missing Column* was celebrated as innovative, pushing architectural ideas forwards. But what did the innovation of substituting a column with an extreme cantilever lead to? – To a dead end, as there exists, for now, only one house with a missing column, and that is the one that Kerez built. Innovation can here only be stated within the very narrow framework of Christian Kerez's own oeuvre. This, of course, holds also for other architects' works. Viewed in this way, innovation must become newness to withstand critical thought – nothing more and nothing less. Innovation in this sense becomes “new for new's sake”. (A serious discussion of this issue would lead us to the realm of Russian Formalist theory and to a discussion of Victor Shklovsky's notion of “enstranging”). Anyway, I do not believe that it is wrong to advocate for newness. This holds especially within architecture, since our discipline is a strange amalgamation of habitude, technology and fiction. Seen like this, newness may incorporate a kind of a poetics of change and surprise of its own. —

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