



Photo: Scotty Cunningham, *Nude Moves Block of Concrete*, 1986.

Bigness

or

the problem of Large

Beyond a certain scale, architecture acquires the properties of Bigness. The best reason to broach Bigness is the one given by climbers of Mount Everest: “because it is there.” Bigness is ultimate architecture.

It seems incredible that the *size* of a building alone embodies an ideological program, independent of the will of its architects.

Of all possible categories, Bigness does not seem to deserve a manifesto; discredited as an intellectual problem, it is apparently on its way to extinction — like

the dinosaur — through clumsiness, slowness, inflexibility, difficulty. But in fact, only Bigness instigates the *regime of complexity* that mobilizes the full intelligence of architecture and its related fields.

One hundred years ago, a generation of conceptual breakthroughs

and supporting technologies unleashed an architectural Big Bang. By randomizing circulation, short-circuiting distance, artificializing interiors, reducing mass, stretching dimensions, and accelerating construction, the elevator, electricity, air-conditioning, steel, and finally, the new infrastructures formed a cluster of mutations that induced another species of architecture. The combined effects of these inventions were structures taller and deeper—Bigger—than ever before conceived, with a parallel potential for the reorganization of the

social world—a vastly richer programming.

Theorems

Fuelled initially by the thoughtless energy of the purely quantitative, Bigness has been, for nearly a century, a condition almost without thinkers, a revolution without program.

Delirious New York implied a latent “Theory of Bigness” based on five theorems.

1. Beyond a certain critical mass, a building becomes a Big Building. Such a mass can no longer be controlled by a single architectural gesture, or even by any combination of architectural gestures.

This impossibility triggers the autonomy of its parts, but that is not the same as fragmentation: the parts remain committed to the whole.

2. The elevator—with its potential to establish mechanical rather than architectural connections—and its family of related inventions render null and void the classical repertoire of architecture. Issues of composition, scale, proportion, detail are now moot.

The “art” of architecture is useless in Bigness.

3. In Bigness, the distance between core and envelope increases to the point where the

facade can no longer reveal what happens inside. The humanist expectation of “honesty” is doomed: interior and exterior architectures become separate projects, one dealing with the instability of programmatic and iconographic needs, the other—agent of disinformation—offering the city the apparent stability of an object.

Where architecture reveals, Bigness perplexes; Bigness transforms the city from a summation of certainties into an accumulation of mysteries. What you see is no longer what you get.

4. Through size alone, such build-

ings enter an amoral domain, beyond good or bad.

Their impact is independent of their quality.

5. Together, all these breaks — with scale, with architectural composition, with tradition, with transparency, with ethics — imply the final, most radical break: Bigness is no longer part of any urban tissue.

It exists; at most, it coexists.

Its subtext is *fuck* context.

Modernization

In 1978, Bigness seemed a phenomenon of and for (the) New World(s). But in the second half of the eighties, signs multiplied

of a new wave of modernization that would engulf — in more or less camouflaged form — the Old World, provoking episodes of a new beginning even on the “finished” continent.

Against the background of Europe, the shock of Bigness forced us to make what was implicit in *Delirious New York* explicit in our work.

Bigness became a double polemic, confronting earlier attempts at integration and concentration *and* contemporary doctrines that question the possibility of the Whole and the Real as viable categories and resign themselves

to architecture's supposedly inevitable disassembly and dissolution.

Europeans had surpassed the threat of Bigness by theorizing it beyond the point of application. Their contribution had been the "gift" of the megastructure, a kind of all-embracing, all-enabling technical support that ultimately questioned the status of the individual building: a very safe Bigness, its true implications excluding implementation. Yona Friedman's *urbanisme spatiale* (1958) was emblematic: Bigness floats over Paris like a metallic blanket of clouds, promising unlimited but unfocused potential renewal of "everything," but never lands, never confronts, never claims its rightful place—criticism as decoration.

In 1972, Beaubourg—Platonic Loft—

had proposed spaces where "anything" was possible. The resulting flexibility was unmasked as the imposition of a theoretical average at the expense of both character and precision—*entity* at the price of *identity*. Perversely, its sheer demonstrativeness precluded the genuine neutrality realized without effort in the American skyscraper.

So marked was the generation of May '68, *my* generation—supremely intelligent, well informed, correctly traumatized by selected cataclysms, frank in its borrowings from other disciplines—by the failure of this and similar models of density and integration—by their systematic insensitivity to the particular—that it proposed two major defense lines: dismantlement and disappearance.

In the first, the world is decomposed into incompatible fractals of uniqueness, each a pretext for further disintegration of the whole: a paroxysm of fragmentation that turns the particular into a *system*. Behind this breakdown of program according to the smallest functional particles looms the perversely unconscious revenge of the old form-follows-function doctrine that drives the content of the project—behind fireworks of intellectual and formal sophistication—relentlessly toward the anticlimax of diagram, doubly disappointing since its aesthetic suggests the rich orchestration of chaos. In this landscape of dismemberment and phony disorder, each activity is *put in its place*.

The programmatic hybridizations/

proximities/frictions/overlaps/superpositions that are possible in Bigness—in fact, the entire apparatus of *montage* invented at the beginning of the century to organize relationships between independent parts—are being undone by one section of the present avant-garde in compositions of almost laughable pedantry and rigidity, behind apparent wildness.

The second strategy, disappearance, transcends the question of Bigness—of massive presence—through an extended engagement with simulation, virtuality, nonexistence.

A patchwork of arguments scavenged since the sixties from American sociologists, ideologues, philosophers, French intellectuals, cybermystics, etc., suggests that architecture will be the

first “solid that melts into air” through the combined effects of demographic trends, electronics, media, speed, the economy, leisure, the death of God, the book, the phone, the fax, affluence, democracy, the end of the Big Story...

Preempting architecture’s actual disappearance, *this* avant-garde is experimenting with real or simulated virtuality, reclaiming, in the name of modesty, its former omnipotence in the world of virtual reality (where fascism may be pursued with impunity?).

Maximum

Paradoxically, the Whole and the Real ceased to exist as possible enterprises for the architect exactly at the moment where the approaching end of the second millennium saw an all-out rush to

reorganization, consolidation, expansion, a clamoring for megascale. Otherwise engaged, an entire profession was incapable, finally, of exploiting dramatic social and economic events that, if confronted, could restore its credibility.

The absence of a theory of Bigness — what is the maximum architecture can do? — is architecture’s most debilitating weakness. Without a theory of Bigness, architects are in the position of Frankenstein’s creators: instigators of a partly successful experiment whose results are running amok and are therefore discredited.

Because there is no theory of Bigness, we don’t know what to do with it, we don’t know where to put it, we don’t know when to use it, we don’t know how to

plan it. Big mistakes are our only connection to Bigness.

But in spite of its dumb name, Bigness is a theoretical domain at this *fin de siècle*: in a landscape of disarray, disassembly, dissociation, disclamation, the attraction of Bigness is its potential to reconstruct the Whole, resurrect the Real, reinvent the collective, reclaim maximum possibility.

Only through Bigness can architecture dissociate itself from the exhausted artistic/ideological movements of modernism and formalism to regain its instrumentality as vehicle of modernization.

Bigness recognizes that architecture as we know it is in difficulty, but it does not overcompensate through regurgitations of even more architecture. It proposes a new economy in which no longer "all is architecture," but in which a strategic posi-

tion is regained through retreat and concentration, yielding the rest of a contested territory to enemy forces.

Beginning

Bigness destroys, but it is also a new beginning. It can reassemble what it breaks.

A paradox of Bigness is that in spite of the calculation that goes into its planning—in fact, through its very rigidities—it is the one architecture that engineers the unpredictable. Instead of enforcing coexistence, Bigness depends on regimes of freedoms, the assembly of maximum difference.

Only Bigness can sustain a promiscuous proliferation of events in a single container. It develops strategies to organize both their independence and interdependence within a larger entity in a symbiosis that exacerbates rather than compromises specificity.

Through contamination rather than purity

and quantity rather than quality, only Bigness can support genuinely new relationships between functional entities that expand rather than limit their identities. The artificiality and complexity of Bigness release function from its defensive armor to allow a kind of liquefaction; programmatic elements react with each other to create new events — Bigness returns to a model of programmatic *alchemy*.

At first sight, the activities amassed in the structure of Bigness *demand* to interact, but Bigness also keeps them apart. Like plutonium rods that, more or less immersed, dampen or promote nuclear reaction, Bigness regulates the intensities of programmatic coexistence.

Although Bigness is a blueprint for perpetual intensity, it also offers degrees of serenity and even blandness. It is simply impossible to animate its entire mass with

intention. Its vastness exhausts architecture's compulsive need to decide and determine. Zones will be left out, free from architecture.

Team

Bigness is where architecture becomes both most and least architectural: most because of the enormity of the object; least through the loss of autonomy — it becomes instrument of other forces, it *depends*.

Bigness is impersonal: the architect is no longer condemned to stardom.

Even as Bigness enters the stratosphere of architectural ambition — the pure chill of megalomania — it can be achieved only at the price of giving up control, of transfiguration. It implies a web of umbilical cords to other disciplines whose performance is as critical as the architect's: like mountain climbers tied together by life-saving ropes, the makers of Bigness are

a *team* (a word not mentioned in the last 40 years of architectural polemic).

Beyond signature, Bigness means surrender to technologies; to engineers, contractors, manufacturers; to politics; to others. It promises architecture a kind of post-heroic status — a realignment with neutrality.

Bastion

If Bigness transforms architecture, its accumulation generates a new kind of city. The exterior of the city is no longer a collective theater where “it” happens; there’s no collective “it” left. The street has become residue, organizational device, mere segment of the continuous metropolitan plane where the remnants of the past face the equipments of the new in an uneasy standoff. Bigness can exist *anywhere* on that plane. Not only is Bigness incapable of establishing relationships with the classical city — *at most, it coexists*

— but in the quantity and complexity of the facilities it offers, it is itself urban.

Bigness no longer needs the city: it competes with the city; it represents the city; it preempts the city; or better still, it *is* the city. If urbanism generates potential and architecture exploits it, Bigness enlists the generosity of urbanism against the meanness of architecture.

Bigness = urbanism vs. architecture.

Bigness, through its very independence of context, is the one architecture that can survive, even exploit, the now-global condition of the tabula rasa: it does not take its inspiration from givens too often squeezed for the last drop of meaning; it gravitates opportunistically to locations of maximum infrastructural promise; it is, finally, its own *raison d’être*.

In spite of its size, it is modest.

Not all architecture, not all program, not all

events will be swallowed by Bigness. There are many “needs” too unfocused, too weak, too unrespectable, too defiant, too secret, too subversive, too weak, too “nothing” to be part of the constellations of Bigness. Bigness is the last bastion of architecture — a contraction, a hyper-architecture. The containers of Bigness will be landmarks in a post-architectural landscape — a world scraped of architecture in the way Richter’s paintings are scraped of paint: inflexible, immutable, definitive, forever there, generated through superhuman effort. Bigness surrenders the field to after-architecture. 1994

Gerhard Richter, *Abstract Painting 726 (detail)*, 1990.

