ABSTRACT

This chapter traces the parallel development of the concept of standardization in architecture and of the idea of the architect as an artist/individual. The juxtaposition between the two goes back to Leon Batista Alberti, underlines modern architecture and reaches the current day where it still defines two different approaches for the production of architectural form through with the aid of digital media. The chapter proposes a third direction that breaks free from the dialectical opposition of the two and follows Deleuze's idea of the analog as a way to operate through modulation. That new direction is illustrated through an example in digital fabrication.

BETWEEN STANDARDS AND INDIVIDUALISM

At the beginning of July of 1914, at the Werkbund conference in Cologne a heated argument took place between two pivotal figures of the early days of modern architecture: the German Hermann Muthesius and the Belgian Henry van de Velde. The Werkbund was an association of architects, artists and industrialists devoted to the establishment of relations between the design professionals and the industry as well as to the promotion of German design abroad. The previous month, the ‘1914 Werkbund exhibition’ had just taken place, including Bruno Taut’s glass pavilion and a model factory by Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer within a large array of very different proposals and approaches. In the conference, Muthesius was clear as to his vision of architecture and the aim of the Werkbund:

Both architecture and the whole area of Werkbund activity go toward standardization. Only thanks to standardization these branches can be respected again, like it used to be during the époques of harmonious development of civilization. Only standardization, as a “blessed” concentration of powers can create the universal and generally recognized sense of taste... (Conrads, 1975, p. 28)

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But while Muthesius left little doubt for his commitment towards an industrialized version of architecture, van de Velde was not willing to go down without a fight and emphatically declared that

...[a]s long as there are artists in the Werkbund they will oppose to any suggestion of a norm of standardization. The artist is in his heart of hearts an ardent individualist, a free and spontaneous spirit. He will never voluntarily subject himself to a discipline which impose on him normes and types… (Conrads, 1975, p. 29)

That juxtaposition between Muthesius’ call for standardization and van de Velde’s support for the artist’s individuality became a regular reference for almost all of the subsequent historians and theoreticians of modern architecture; and while it would have been tempting to proclaim that the evolution of modern architecture proved Muthesius to be right (and many did so) that is not necessarily the case. For example, the Bauhaus managed to incorporate both theses during its course. Its first incarnation at Weimar, established in 1919 by Walter Gropius – himself a student of van de Velde who suggested him as an appropriate director for the new school --, was in fact based almost exclusively on an arts and crafts mentality and was opposed to any idea of industrialization of architecture. However, already in 1925 when the Bauhaus reopened at Dessau, Gropius had already changed his mind proclaiming that architecture should work together with the industry and its modes of standardization.

And if Gropius changed his views on the matter over a period of 6 years Le Corbusier managed to express both views at the same time in his famous book “Towards a New Architecture”. There he exclaims that

We must aim at the fixing of standards in order to face the problem of perfection. The Parthenon is a product of selection applied to a standard. Architecture operates in accordance with standards. Standards are a matter of logic, analysis and minute study: they are based on a problem which has been well stated. A standard is definitely established by experiment… (Corbusier, 2008)

Despite the previous position however, Le Corbusier seems to believe at the same time to the architect’s role as an artist: the work of the architect according to his writings is similar to that of the sculptor; architecture is to be understood as a play of masses with light and shadow that cannot be limited by mere utilitarian needs and engineering. That apparent contradiction in Le Corbusier’s position was present throughout his career. The CIAM, controlled to a large extend by him, placed standardization quite highly in its list of priorities for modern architecture. Already in the first CIAM meeting in 1928 at La Sarraz, Le Corbusier himself defined standardization as one of the four pillars of modern architecture (the other three being modern techniques, the general economic system and urbanism). And yet, Le Corbusier based his work on his highly individualistic and artistic approach towards design that established him as a ‘grand master’ and set his work apart from almost all other architects of his time. Therefore, it appears like both approaches remained alive throughout the course of modern architecture.

That juxtaposition between standardization and individualism would have been a subject of interest limited to those who study the history and development of modern architecture if it haven’t been present from the very beginning of the modern era and more importantly if it wasn’t a concern that becomes even more pressing in the current condition of architecture. That is because, even though early modern pioneers saw themselves and their approach as a radical break with the architecture of the 19th century and before - with standardization playing an important part in this perceived break -, in retrospect we