Eppur si muove

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ABSTRACT
What is the form of movement? This essay examines how architecture has consistently rejected movement, while at the same time claiming that it is at the centre of its preoccupations. The essay focuses on Bolles + Wilson's New Luxor Theatre *to investigate how this building, and more specifically, its ramp for trucks, propose a new way of understanding the relationship between movement and buildings. To put forward its argument, the essay draws both from architectural history (the uses of terms such as "circulation" or the recourse to mechanistic metaphors, such as the liner) and an analysis of the architectural element itself (how this ramp differs from others). Overall, the essay investigates how architecture, by definition a static pile of material, deals with the most unstable and unpredictable element of all, the mobile.*

There is a piece of land waiting to be developed in the post-industrial riverside area of Kop van Zuid in Rotterdam. A theatre is needed, but the site is not very big. This theatre is for cabaret, popular music and popular culture in general; the public it addresses is one that wants a night out: perhaps a couple of drinks, a nice show, to enjoy themselves amid a nice crowd. The foyer has to be big to accommodate the pre-theatre activities, so the hall is raised and the foyer takes the ground level, aligning its interior with the street. But the stage needs to be served: a spectacle is not only about the show, but also about the work behind – stage construction, technical installations, etc. Bolles + Wilson then introduce a ramp for trucks to go to the back of the stage of the New Luxor Theatre.

This essay will propose that this ramp is not only a clever design solution that solves a practical problem, but an operation that tackles a fundamental disciplinary problem: a building's relation to movement. The New Luxor ramp is a built argument that effectively surpasses the discipline's reductive understandings of movement and, by doing so, opens up unexpected possibilities for both building and discipline, inventing a new way for architecture to participate in the construction of public life.

Elusive by definition, movement has been a central problem for the discipline (after all, it is the people moving inside buildings that give sense to the otherwise blank piles of matter), but the way of tackling it has been utterly insufficient – not to say completely off point. The use of the concept of "circulation" and the recourse to metaphors of movement are two of the main strategies used in architecture to deal with movement, but as I will show, they are, on the contrary, absolutely about the static.

"Circulation", a term adopted within architecture only in the second half of the nineteenth century (Forty, 2000, p. 87), although apparently naming the flows of people moving freely inside a building, really suggests the constitution of a sealed, finite, environment: the building as an ideal body without contact to the exterior (Forty, 2000, p. 93). Its wider understandings, as key concept for economics and thereafter urbanism, stress this characteristic: circulation defines a route for goods, fixes it as a flow, and therefore equals movement to the channel where that movement takes place. This is, of course, a good solution for architecture: a channel can be drawn whereas movement cannot – and so the grip on the mobile is surrendered to the static. If an architect's concern is said to be "circulation" (as Le Corbusier in 1930: "architecture is circulation"), his real interest then is in the sealing and fixing of movement rather than the exploration of its capacities.

Metaphors of movement, on the other hand, are also quite contradictorily focused on the static. How did Le Corbusier's liner, aeroplane and automobile impact architecture? Simply put, it's the image of the liner, the point of view of the aeroplane and the economics of the automobile industry – all three informing the building's exterior. Ship-like balconies and porthole windows, a roof garden for the pleasure of jet setters and a Dom-Ino *frame eventually housing a shiny new car made architects overlook their most essential quality: that these machines moved.*

Modern architects stayed on the surface of things and so the new style was born. Ships, planes and cars were taken over and naturalised; their contribution: the *aesthetics of movement. The modern building's interior, on the other hand, adopted an altogether different metaphor of movement that simply reinforced the idea of the sealed entity. The circumscribed dynamics of the factory plan (the basis for the free plan, as some would argue) is based on the repetitive gesture of the production line, defining static and stable uses, able to be fixed down into functions that label spaces. So even if the building looked like a liner and worked like a machine, it was always from a static point of view – in the mechanistic metaphor, the sight was fixed in the inner workings of the ship (and therefore it could have been* any *machine).*

Both circulation and mobile mechanistic metaphors then evict movement from buildings. What they offer is a way of thinking buildings as a closed-off system, where movement is strictly predicted through the design of channels. The most evident demonstration of how useless this is lies in the expansion of the sight: buildings are in the city, in a setting, people go in and out and offer an everyday refutation of this apparent angular stone of architecture.

But if movement is evicted from buildings, it is not necessarily relocated in the city: just as in buildings movement is turned into a function, and, through graphic means, fixed into a drawing, movement in the city is also arrested in order to be managed and controlled(1). The infrastructure of transportation is all about the knowledge of where people is and is going to be: the institution of an official time, the scheduling of life through timetables, the detailed planning of circulation systems (such as underground, trains, road systems, etc.), allow controlling the apparently uncontrollable. And for all the rest, there is the police: unexpected, out-of-the-norm movement is subject to arrest(2).

This is how the mobile disappears from the city and its buildings: unpredictable movement is a menace to order. Free, unprescribed movement is relocated to the countryside, where it is harmless: that would explain why the only aesthetic theory based on movement of people is the picturesque. Movement is central but decidedly individual, bucolic, non-associative, contemplative: it is strictly apolitical(3).

The New Luxor Theatre *however, with its ramp for trucks going up from road to back of the stage, proposes a complete dislocation of these received categories. What is new about the theatre's ramp and its effects? One could look both at theatres and "rampy" buildings to measure the extent of the invention. The Luxor could be related to, for example, the* Royal Festival Hall, *in London: in both there is a clear investment in the design of ample circulation spaces with a popular vocation (Forty, 2001, pp. 200-211)(4).*

This look, however, concentrates only on the inside – and the ramp is outside. Comparing the New Luxor Theatre *in relation to other buildings in which ramps shape the overall design, such as the* Guggenheim Museum *(or perhaps the Fiat Factory, its automobile parallel), maybe the Luxor is not that innovative (the Guggenheim* is *a coily ramp, with circulation both organising the programme* and *shaping the building), but the Luxor stands out of this category. Despite the fact that in the New Luxor the ramp also shapes the building (it hugs its exterior), it stays outside the theatre, it almost doesn't touch it. The New Luxor is not a ramp-building, but a theatre that suddenly takes care of trucks.*

And this is the central innovation of this building, this is what allows the New Luxor's ramp to not only be a good design solution, but also a contribution to the discipline: by designing a space for the road to participate in the building, the theatre is redefining the limit between interior (what is theatre) and exterior (what is road). The ramp for trucks opens up a kind of space inexistent before, it generates an in-between that participates of both interior and exterior life in equal measure. Just like the ramp doesn't modify the theatre (the interior is still a conventional theatre), it equally doesn't wish to be just like the street. By inventing a non-street, non-theatre space, it proposes a new way for architecture to participate in public life: by catering not only for the show but also for trucks coming from suppliers, factories and ports, the theatre is establishing connections with both life and *the support for life – what could be called infrastructure. But it does so in the terms set by the building and not by surrendering to the latter: the New Luxor is decidedly* not *just another building for cars, such as the ubiquitous parking building or, say, the* Port Authority *in New York (a fantastic building, nonetheless). By designing a space exclusively for trucks, the* New Luxor Theatre *dislocates the until now rigid definitions set out both by* “circulation” (here, the building takes care of the movement of people and goods) and mechanistic metaphors (by proposing a thick limit that questions and surpasses conceptions of the interior as secluded machine).

This specific position, carefully articulated between an interior that stays like a theatre and an exterior that takes the road in but doesn’t surrender to it can be traced back to the pre-history of the idea of this ramp. The centrality of movement in the work of Bolles + Wilson, and more specifically in the New Luxor Theatre, has both historical origins and geopolitical ones. Bolles and Wilson cite Ledoux and his architecture parlante as one of their influences. For the architects of the Enlightenment, as Picon writes,

> “Architecture was the art of producing images or that of linking up impressions, which although initially fugitive, accumulate and interconnect, so as to form a single complex and composite entity, in which the genuine character of the building could be discerned”. (1992, p. 272)

In Ledoux’s architecture parlante “there was no image except in the mind of a spectator” (Picon, 1992, p. 272) and so the visitor had to move around the building in order to get the full idea, to articulate in his head the experience of the building. This conception of movement as the element tying together and giving sense to the otherwise mute built forms, is perhaps akin to Le Corbusier’s promenade architecturale – the ramps and staircases of, say, Villa Savoye and the Carpenter Center a good case of this. This, despite being an expansion of the usual understandings of “circulation”, still stays within that conception (Forty, 2000, p. 93). In the particular case of the New Luxor, the promenade is present in the conception of the theatre’s interior: Bolles + Wilson wanted to create a “peripatetic interior”, one where the “moving viewer” would experience “the interior landscape of the Luxor” (Wilson, Malinowski & Nyman, 2002, p. 16). The ramp for trucks, however, is outside the theatre.

Turning to the exterior, it is telling to encounter Bolles + Wilson’s concept of the “eurolandscape”: they see all their European projects and buildings as being part of it. They understand the eurolandscape as the unlimited European territory where there is not that much difference between the urban and the non-urban (Bolles & Wilson, 2001, p. 20), a continuous expanse where infrastructure domesticates the territory. In this situation of extended sameness, their projects act by irritation – by discoherence and adjacency rather than reproduction. The position of the New Luxor Theatre within the eurolandscape is consequently not one of continuity, but of dislocation. The ramp for trucks is not a seamless continuation of the road, but a different stage altogether: it doesn’t look like infrastructure and therefore doesn’t reproduce it.

Most importantly, however, is that Bolles + Wilson’s take on the problem of infrastructure is done not by theorising – they claim to reject “the alien realm of pure speculation” (Bolles & Wilson, 2001, p. 52) –, but by making their buildings assume a position: in their words, not only architects but, most importantly, “buildings establish a ‘social contract’” (Bolles & Wilson, 2001, p. 17).

To finish this close-up to the New Luxor’s ramp, I want to examine a last piece of evidence. In 1984, Peter Wilson exhibited some of his drawings in the Architectural Association’s gallery in a show dubbed “Peter Wilson: The Bridge Building and the Ship Shape”. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition we can find some familiar themes to those discussed here – what I would argue are the seeds for what would later be materialised in the theatre’s ramp. The two typologies presented in the title offer different strategies for architecture. Wilson writes on the shipshape:

> “An alternative definition [of the shipshape] might present it to us as laden with precedent: as hyerogliph, as cabalistic arc, bark, or Kandinsky standing figure. It is as potent as it is diverse, as a symbol as well as in formal interpretation. Consequently in our projects we appropriate the shipshape both as icon (figurative foreground) and as ordering mechanism (abstract frame)”. (1984, p. 4)

He (and then after with Julia Bolles) would explore the potentials of the shipshape as far as it is “a fundamental architectural metaphor” and so his (and then their) projects would look like ships – like Bolles + Wilson’s proposal for the Opéra Bastille, very ship-like indeed. But the shipshape had its limits: he immediately realises that perhaps the object that most benefits from the shipshape is just a simple bench – a somehow disappointing conclusion.

The bridge building, on the other hand, is a “type [that] is a collaboration *of building (occupation) and bridge (traversing mechanism)" (Wilson, 1984, p. 5). Wilson traces this typology to medieval bridges, such as the* Ponte Vecchio *or the old* London Bridge *– bridges that had houses and shops on their sides. Within the catalogue, the bridge building is, just as the ship, examined as a metaphor: Alvin Boyarski, in the interview, says "you've been designing bridges for a while and it's obviously a metaphor of some kind" to what Wilson responds that yes, the bridge is the latest metaphor in his collection (Wilson, 1984, p. 12).*

I would argue that both typologies, inasmuch as verbal metaphors allowing for architectural thinking to happen, have an almost opposite capacity to trigger new architectural knowledge – and so the end of this essay is not about the building itself, but the relationship between buildings and architectural knowledge as articulated by language. On the one hand, the shipshape is reductive, inasmuch it refers to a shape (and evidently still indebted to the aesthetic fascination with the modernist liner); on the other, the bridge building is productive*, as no matter how formal or metaphoric the analysis of a bridge is, it will still be about crossing. Movement, serving a purpose, allowing people to go from one place to another, are part of the definition of what a bridge is – not just the fixed structure (which if devoid from movement would be a "beam", a "platform", or another word like that) but also the movement within it.*

Just as "circulation", the "liner", the "shipshape" are words and strategies for reducing, flattening and fixing movement, the recourse to the appropriate metaphor – in this case, the bridge – allows for an altogether different kind of reasoning, one that is not just figurative, but also material, spatial and tied to what is happening out there.

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NOTES

(1) This is, roughly, the subject matter of my doctoral dissertation, *Getting There* (AA, supervisor: Mark Cousins).

(2) The word "arrest" is central in my thesis: in it, I draw a parallel between what description does (following Alex Purves: description effects an arrest in the time of the narrative, see Purves, 2010, p. 141), and therefore what maps do (they are tools of graphic description), with the invention of the police in the eighteenth century (see Nicolas Delamaire, Traité de la Police, 1705/38). I argue that it is no coincidence that the European mapping enterprises of the Enlightenment happened at the same time that the police was invented.

(3) And the urban theories derived from the picturesque, mainly Hubert de Cronin Hasting's *Townscape*, insist in retaining the "feeling" of the rural.

(4) In the *New Luxor Theatre*, it is the response to programmatic requirements (the New Luxor's is about a "night out", therefore big foyers with bars) and in the *Royal Festival Hall*, the materialisation of a will to open and make available classical music to larger audiences in the context of the Festival of Britain (Forty, 2001, pp. 200-211).