

Some Binary Architecture - Sites for Possible Thought.

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There are some works of architecture which it is useful to describe as 'binary.' Their spatial field is bipolar, which is to say that their meaning is organized—whether deliberately or consequentially—around two poles, two identities, two sets of constructed meaning. It is architecture with two different identities. What is interesting about binary architecture, is when a differentiated semantic field, which I will call a region of *sameness* is generated between these poles of constructed identity. It is this region of sameness between poles of identity which marks binary architecture as a site for possible thought. Some works which illustrate this idea in terms of architecture are:

- Bernard Tschumi's *National Centre for Contemporary Arts* at Le Fresnoy, in which the new roof is folded over a collection of old buildings which it is otherwise supposed to replace. Jeffrey Kipnis has already criticised this work in terms of its "informational" (in contrast to "deformational") character.¹ Here the poles of constructed identity are the 'old' and the 'new.' The new does not destroy the old, but enfolds and preserves it. What is interesting about this work is the way that conceptual attention focusses in the realm between the two roofs. Tschumi sets up the structural trusses as exhibition spaces, communication paths, 'art in the clouds' in the realm between old and new;
- the *National Gallery Extension* in London by Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, where enforced adjacency with the 19th century building of William Wilkins enriches the separate meanings of post-modern pastiche and neo-classical philology (*fig 1*). Venturi and Scott Brown were careful neither to denigrate, nor to damn with false praise the neo-classical composition—which might otherwise be a tired monument to people's art. In the same gesture—with a 'crescendo of columns'—they raised post-modern architecture to a representative place in the architecture of London, and raised the Victorian neo-classical to a plane of genuine historical interest. Martin Pawley has described this two-fold architecture in terms of "the antithetical and semiological language" of the information age confronting "the gaunt geometrical old timer" of the architectural tradition.² Venturi's work here also

draws attention to another remarkable two-fold architecture—St. Martin's in the Field, whose striking juxtaposition of a temple and a spire makes a memorable construction of Anglo-Saxon complex identity in the 18th century.

- the *Castelvecchio Museum* in Verona where Carlo Scarpa used modernist ornament like a scalpel to break open the body of an architectural tradition. This remarkable work was carried out in the 1950s and 1960s, when all of modernism was otherwise injected with visions of utopian identity. Scarpa, with great delicacy, created a realm of sensitive retrospection between what were then widely understood to be opposite poles: modernity and history.
- and nearer to home, the *Auckland War Memorial Museum*, built in the 1920s, which metaphorically 'ingested' an ancestral Maori architecture, *Hotunui*, into its classical interior, but which, like some Titan in the belly of Cronus, refuses to digest it, and instead lives on as significant architecture precisely because of a binary tension generated between different architectural traditions (*figs 2, 3*).

These various works of binary architectures are significant accessories for theory in the age of information. Their bi-polar spatial field is analogous to binary information. Binary architecture can be likened to a binary switch, the elementary building block of the digital computer. In a binary switch there are two poles: the pole of 'certainly on' and the pole of 'certainly off.' 1 = on; 0 = off. But what is the state of a switch when you don't know whether it is on or off? The realm between 1 and 0 is a region of logical or ontological uncertainty. It is called binary information. Binary information is the essential theoretical construct of the information age.

Binary architecture can give us a renewed feeling for what Martin Heidegger called the 'two-fold.' The greater part of Heidegger's later works hinged around the difference as he saw it between *sameness* and *identity*. In Heidegger's view, proceeding from his seminal paper of 1957, difference is ontological, whereas identity is constructed.³ But difference can be a blunt instrument in the de-struction of identity.

Difference can be merely separateness, and as such it is often used as an excuse merely to construct a separate identity. Heidegger repeatedly sharpened and refined his concept of ontological difference until it became almost-the-same as identity itself. In the region of refined doubt between sameness and identity we find Heidegger's concept of the two-fold, the grounds for certain ethical claims that Heidegger makes in relation to *techne* and *poiesis*. Binary architecture reveals a region of ontological *sameness* between two constructed poles of *identity*.

The two-fold is found in Heidegger's writings with a wide range of interpretations. First of all in terms of technology—because architecture today, in the age of information, is still a confrontation between poetry and technology—Heidegger argued that the construction of identity is the rule of technology. Identity means the equi-form, the “dull unity of mere uniformity.” Technology is ‘dangerous’ because it accumulates identity. Technology challenges, enframes the world with uniformity. Technology is totalitarian in this sense, because it privileges identity and represses difference. But technology also has a ‘saving power.’ And here we see its ‘two-fold’ character. The saving power of technology awaits to be discovered in its revelation of sameness, or *poiesis*.

The two-fold is a dialectic without resolution. It is manifest contradiction. The two-fold opens all of Heidegger's significant regions of investigation—between the poet and the thinker; between the Greek and the American; between the Oriental and the Occidental; between the original and the modern; between the abstract rules of thought and what Deleuze has aptly called “opinions among friends.”⁴

I can illustrate the two-fold by folding a piece of paper in half. If the fold is placed horizontally and in the background, what is presented to the eye are two horizontal planes. This is the dualism of Cartesian metaphysics, and of classical and baroque architecture. Here we see earth and heaven separated from each other, a dualistic view of the world. If I turn the paper around so the fold is now in the foreground, we see the Deleuzian ‘fold,’ the crease, the catastrophe of non-differentiability.⁵

But if I now put the paper on end, with the fold uppermost, in the shape of Lambda, **L**, we see that the two-fold now resembles the graphical field of binary information. The two ‘feet’ of the Lambda represent two poles of identity or states of certainty, where a binary switch is either on or off. At both of these poles the degree of choice, uncertainty and

negative entropy is zero. The apex of the Lambda, the fold in the paper, is a point of maximum binary information. In architectural terms it is a point of refined doubt or irresolution.

In the remainder of this paper, for purposes of illustration, I will explore the two-fold or binary architecture of the *Auckland Museum*. First I describe its two poles of constructed identity: the neo-classical museum—European, colonial, intending dominance and the repression of indigenous difference; and the post-contact Maori meeting house, which is an architecture of resistance, belligerent difference, and at the same time also an architecture which constructs identity, but in this case through a profoundly different conception of space and a mythopoetic ontology.

I will attempt to describe some of the richnesses and contradictions which are set up in the region of *sameness* between these conflicting poles of identity. Architecturally the region of sameness may be located in the ‘Maori Court,’ a central space in the museum which is shared or conjoined by both the neo-classical and antipodean poles. In cultural and political terms in New Zealand, this region of sameness is called ‘bi-culturalism.’ Bi-culturalism is an essential two-fold in New Zealand's political and cultural life, a small window of acceptability between what we perceive to be two unacceptable poles—assimilation and apartheid. I will briefly address these issues with reference to the binary organisation of the *Auckland War Memorial Museum*.

Finally I will discuss what I see to be the principle value of binary architecture, and in particular the value of the *Auckland Museum*, in terms of the ethics of alterity. Because binary architecture diverts attention from the normal architectural agenda of identity construction, and because it attends instead to the information-rich possibilities which are opened in in-between spaces, the theory of architecture may now embark into the realm of the ethical. The binary construction I suggest is the saving power of architecture in an age of technology and information.

The *Auckland Museum* is a distinctive monument, a proud memorial to those who fell in two world wars. Its neo-classical exterior is doubly significant not only for the various tropes of sacrifice that are inscribed upon it as ornament but also because it was to the theatres of the old world—in Turkey, Greece, Italy, North Africa and France—that two generations of young New Zealand men and women were sent upon their ‘great adventure.’

The facade of the entrance porch is closely modelled on the *Parthenon* in Athens (*fig 4*). This gives it every appearance of being determinedly mono-cultural. And mono-culture was consistent with the dominant political agenda of the inter-war years. The policy then was to assimilate cultural differences at all cost. Among other meanings, neo-classicism is an architecture of colonial domination.

The exterior also sets the scene for the interior space of the Museum. The ethnographic and trophic displays are laid out within the museum on an orthogonal grid, organised on three levels. The largest central room on the ground floor is the 'Maori Court.'

Hirini Mead writes:

Two contrasting institutions in New Zealand are focus points for Maori art. One is the museums of various types and the other is the meeting house. The museum is a Western institution ... Museums of natural history ... collect rocks, fossil remains, dead birds, butterflies, fish, reptiles and four-footed animals. We, the Maori, are included among the preserved fish and the fossils and we often have to compete with them for the scarce resources of the museums (fig 5).⁶

It is necessary to explain the sense of grievance with which Mead appears to personalise the museum artefacts. "We, the Maori" are humanly enmeshed in the space of the museum like a living presence thrashing in a net. In a previous paper I discussed at some length the difference between Maori and European attitudes or comportments towards works of art.⁷ Maori treat their own taonga, in particular their meeting houses, as if they were living personalities. When an artefact is catalogued and archived in a museum it is as if a living person were entrapped or imprisoned (*fig 6*).

Architecture is an organising principle in space. Bernard Tschumi describes it as paradoxical that architecture both makes space distinct and also states the precise nature of space.⁸ Architecture both defines and is defined by, both organises and is organised by, its unique spatial situation. Michael Austin was the first architect who clearly described the spatial structure of Maori meeting houses in terms of openness and closure, front and rear.⁹ He pointed out that meeting houses are located in their natural landscapes with closing elements to the back and open elements, including always a *marae atea* or open meeting ground, to the front. Thus the meeting

house 'reads' the natural landscape and clarifies the organisation of space (*fig 7*).

There is a linear organisation of space in the Maori meeting house, from darkness to light. The back wall of the house often signifies the night, and death. The front wall, the doorway, and in particular the lintel over the door often depict creation, birth, emergence into the light. The open space in front of the meeting house signifies openness and clearing.

The complex relationship between meeting house and landscape is never merely picturesque. There is also a political and proprietary agenda—which was particularly aggravated by resistance to the colonial appropriation of land in New Zealand in the 19th and 20th centuries. The interlayering of space in the meeting house has other cosmological significances as well. Roger Neich claims to be 'extending' Austin's case when he argues that the meeting house also defines certain directions of the landscape in which it is located. "Without the meeting house standing at the focus of the landscape pointing out where is 'front' and 'rear,' the notions of enclosure and openness would have little cultural significance."¹⁰ Roger Neich, incidentally, is the Curator of Ethnology at the *Auckland Museum*.

This has been a brief and summary review of how the architecture of the meeting house has been used to construct and polarise Maori identity. Binary architecture is constructed upon two poles of identity. The museum is polarised by two cultural constructs, the Maori and the European. The space of the *Parthenon* is gridded, "polis-ised" and interiorising, and the space of *Hotunui* is focused, 'pagan' and exteriorising (*fig 8*).

The 'Maori Court' is an un-owned realm of sameness between these two poles of identity. We may see this in the way it is used several times every day in the re-enactment of mihi or meeting for benefit of tourists and visitors to the museum, when a party of young Maori men and women, strangely dressed in red robes and bone ornaments, ceremonially challenge a disparate party of Australian or Japanese tourists (*fig 9*). I don't want to get into a fruitless discussion about authenticity and cultural purity, tourism, exploitation and the devaluation of meaning in the migration of signs. Of course this daily mihi is tokenised but it is not uneventful. I merely record what happens each day in the 'Maori Court.' Whatever its validity or otherwise, a mihi could not happen without the ethical sway of the two-fold—without the enlivening, refining, grinding difference of identities

which is underwritten and constructed by the particular conjunction of architectures of the museum and the meeting house.

More than 900,000 people visit this museum every year, and there is a real sense in which it has become Auckland's marae. It defines, if you like, the cosmology of this bi-cultural city. To summarise, let me quickly enumerate some dimensions which begin to define the *Auckland Museum* as binary architecture.

1. Life and death. We think of death, Hegel once said, as an extraneous event which contradicts our own life. But death and life are one thing. *Hotunui* is enlivened architecture, an ancestral presence. Even transposed out of its tribal landscape, trapped in the web of the museum, and cast as a dead artefact, *Hotunui* is a lively place. And the *Parthenon*, which ought to be the livelier pole in the partnership, representing the supposed roots of the dominant culture, is instead dead—dead, derivative, imitative.

2. The triumphal procession of Greek columns is centred and focused on British origins and a supposed lineage of European democracy. Yet the neo-classical space of the museum is diffuse and un-centred. By contrast the space of *Hotunui* is intensely focused in the 'Maori Court,' yet its connotations include an Oceanic diffuseness and the dispersal and intended sacrifice of the colonised *other*.

3. The meeting house located inside the museum contradicts our normal expectations of interiority versus exteriority. The museum authorities, we may imagine, intended to display the meeting house as an anonymous representative of the past, the art of a dying culture, an icon of successful assimilation. They brought the house indoors and made it an object for the European gaze. But because it is architecture—because the space of architecture permeates boundaries and refuses the categories that logic would prescribe—*Hotunui* redefines the interior as effectively exterior.

The meeting house is doubly or dubiously owned—by the Museum and by the Ngati Maru, and also by the people of Ngati Awa who originally carved and decorated the house. We should also acknowledge the restoration work contributed by Ngati Whatua and the Morehu, (dispossessed) people of Auckland (*fig 10*).¹¹ The binary space of the museum antagonises the dull equation which architecture normally constructs—between interiority and property.

Heidegger claimed that the two-fold is now 'a global reality.' It 'befell' Western thinking only about two hundred years ago. It is recent and we are not yet accustomed to it.¹² But how does architecture contribute to the understanding of the two-fold? How can architecture reveal the two-fold as saving-power in the age of information?

Architecture is making of thoughtful constructions in space. Spatial thinking is always more concrete, as compared to abstract logical thinking. Sometimes things can appear quite straightforward in terms of space yet they seem to be hard to say or even illogical in the abstract world of philosophy. The two-fold is like this, rather too paradoxical in terms of thought, yet relatively straight-forward in terms of space. The refined difference that Heidegger draws between sameness and identity can resolve itself quite simply in terms of the space of binary architecture. Two things can be 'the same' as each other, that is similar in every respect, yet so long as they occupy different places in space they are not 'identical.' And in the Auckland Museum, the same space of the Maori Court is a meeting ground of two conflicting identities.

The rigorous logical idea of 'identity' (Leibniz), of two things the same as each other also occupying an identical place, tends to be nonsensical in spatial terms.

Again, in-between spaces are commonplace in architecture; but the thought of a semantic region between concepts, a region which is not itself a concept, seems to present large difficulties in philosophy (Deleuze).

Architecture always has permeable boundaries, composite layers of space between the inside and the outside. But 'fuzzy' boundaries are notoriously difficult to handle in terms of abstract thought. Language sometimes seems to become over-wrought by the use of abstract concepts. So that to speak in terms of space sometimes appears to require a language of contradiction.

Logic advocates clear thinking, and clear thinking needs self-identical concepts. Ever since Parmenides and Aristotle, philosophy has repressed 'the middle term.' Philosophy has only allowed the 'footprint' of the *Lambda*, and disallowed the two-fold.

What I particularly want to draw attention to about binary architecture is its ethical possibilities, its respect for alterity. Each of these works which I have discussed actively sustains the architectural

identity of the *other*. This is remarkable, in terms of Heidegger's thinking, because architecture is technology and technology is supposed to subvert alterity. As Veronique Fóti puts it, Heidegger remained convinced to the end that technology will always actively subvert the unconcealment of its poetic supplement.¹³ But these works which I am calling binary architecture, even although they are technology, display certain poetic qualities with evident respect for the *other*. They project architecture into the realm of the ethical.

The ethical, here, is understood in the sense of 'letting be.' The museum does not condemn the meeting house, but lets it be. Venturi does not belittle Wilkins or mock the shortcomings of his rather undersubscribed version of neoclassicism. Scarpa's ornamentation lets the Casselvecchio be. Tschumi's modernism does not displace the old studios and cinemas but lets them be themselves.

To articulate the ethics of alterity beyond the mere letting-be of technology, architecture must engage in strategies of counter-action. Binary architecture seems to provide an effective strategy, a straightforward approach to alterity. In binary architecture the established technologies or techniques are treated in the normal way as poles of constructed identity. But by constructing two technologies together, two differing identities, whether the difference be cultural, historical, or in terms of function, binary architecture also produces a region, a real space in which certain qualities of refined difference can be explored. The ethics of alterity can be conceived as a sort of negative entropy or creative doubt in the realm between poles of identity. In binary architecture the in-between realm is a finite constructed space in which the thought of the two-fold can dwell (*fig 11*).

NOTES

- 1 J. Kipnis, "Towards a new architecture," *Architectural Design Profile* (1993), n. 102, pp. 41-49.
- 2 M. Pawley, "What London has learned from Las Vegas," *Blueprint* (May 1991), pp. 20-23.
- 3 M. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* trans. J Stambaugh (New York: Harper, 1969).
- 4 Gilles Deleuze, *What is philosophy?* (London : Verso, 1994).
- 5 An edition of *Architectural Design* in 1993 was devoted to architectural works which interpret this

fold literally—projects with folded and crumpled surfaces.

- 6 S. M. Mead, *Te Toi Whakairo* (Auckland: Reed/Methuen, 1986), p. 200.
- 7 M. Linzey, "Speaking to and talking about Maori architecture," *Dwellings, Settlement and Tradition* eds. J. P. Bourdier and N. AlSayyad (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989); also in *Interstices* (1991), n. 1, pp. 50-61.
- 8 B. Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), p. 55.
- 9 M. R. Austin, "A description of the Maori Marae," *The Mutual Interaction of People and their Environment* ed. A. Rappoport (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).
- 10 R. Neich, *Painted Histories* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993), p. 124.
- 11 G. Barton and D. Reynolds, *Hotunui: The Restoration of a Meeting House* (Auckland: Auckland Museum, 1985).
- 12 M. Heidegger, "Principles of thinking," *Piety and Thinking* eds. J. G. Hart and J. C. Maraldo (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 58.
- 13 V. Fóti, *Heidegger and the Poets* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), p. 113.