Remaining constant in the Space-Time (dis)Continuum

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The Space-Time Continuum: the melding of the three dimensions of Space – the 'space' of Space – with the human artifice of time.

The Space-Time (dis)Continuum: the separation of the three dimensions of space – terrestrial space – with the human artifice of time.

Just at the moment we began to make sense of Space and time, out there, we began to lose our sense of space and time, down here. The agent of this separation – of space and time - was speed. That need – a forced, non-primal, inculcated, century and a half old need – forcing ever increasing movement of humans, of goods, of weapons, of all matter through space at ever-increasing speed. Speed was the ultimate display of human ingenuity of our dominance over the very artifice we created to make sense of our world, to make sense of our space - time. Speed valorised time independent of space. Speed decoupled time and space and its homely notions of place, of thingness. New York in a week; Paris in a day; Lagos at the click of a button. It began with the train station and its clock… as big as the moon. Counting down to infinity at ever increasing speed flanked by the watchful eyes, the chiselled emblems of Industrial modernity – the seafarer, the merchant, the banker, the colonist. With speed came velocity, speed hurtling in multiple directions until it collides with matter, with the thingness of space. Destruction, however creative, is destruction all the same. Velocity – targeted speed – and creative destruction were the hallmarks of Industrial Modernity. The wrecking ball and the drawing board its most potent weapons – wielded in the name of progress, agent of speed. Under the weight of progress, cities crumble. Speed hollows out their stuff, its brick, its stones, its memory. Speed promised emancipation and delivered violence. A pervasive violence, guaranteed by laws and regulations; coded in our behaviours; repeated circuitously by our media. Progress, speed, violence, progress, speed, violence… To remain constant in this game is to be an outsider.

But that was the old speed, solid speed. What of our current speed, liquid speed? Speed is no longer vectorised, moving in predetermined ways toward predetermined targets. Speed is a network, invisible, amoebic – liquid, not solid. Work Less! Eat More! That was the promise of speed, pre-recession speed, pre-2008 speed. Work More! Eat More! The reality of speed. Speed hustles and harries us through life to do more, accumulate more, consume more, waste more. We only remember to be mindful because speed made us mindless. We only detox because speed made us toxic. We only stop or pause when speed depletes our battery, waiting for an emergency charge. Speed compelled all of this – fast living, fast food, fast tech, fast charge. The network of possibilities promised by speed become a maze of immediate obstacles. Of locked doors and dead ends that must be unpicked or kicked in without pause, without thought. He who reacts quickest wins. Quickness of reaction is power (a trade, a soundbite, a tweet, a text) and patience has long stopped being a virtue. Anxious haste breeds domination. Global orders dismantled and rebuilt in seconds. Speed, infinite speed, is our only destiny, our only destination. To remain constant in this game is to be an outsider.

Industrial Modernity always knew this, speed was its *sine qua non*. It operated in a new dimension from space, from slow, timeless architectural space. The mill, the docks, the factory, the warehouse – fleeting monuments to speed. To transience, to anti-eternity, to the urgency of capital – to the dislocation of time and space. The industrial was built only for expedience, now everything is *only* built for expedience. The cathedral, the marketplace, the public square, the town hall, the sanctity of the home – all sites of violent exchange, of bodies, capital, data, of self. All space has become a site of industry. Of processing of material - organic, inorganic, analogue or digital. When the wetware of the human brain gave way to the hardware of the machine, space and how we live within it separated from the artifice of time – speed blurring space. As the hardware of the machine now gives way to the software of the network – space is cancelled. Speed (liquid speed) made it no longer viable, no longer useful. Architecture once existed only in the past and in the future. As record and projection. In the historical artefact and the blueprint, that hopeful manifestation of architectural optimism and dumb foresight. Architecture never existed in the present, until now. This is architecture now. The walls and roofs that enclose our new sites of industrial processing – all space – are built only for the present. Space and the matter that encloses it exists only for present purposes. 6% RENT YIELDS! 20% VISITOR NUMBER INCREASE! 12% GREATER THERMAL EFFICIENCY! More is not enough – only speed is enough. Directionless, accumulatory speed. More may not be enough, and less is no longer more. To remain constant in this game is to be an outsider.

Architecture's core function has always been the limiting of human behaviour. The act of defining, demarcating, enveloping, enclosing space has always concerned what can and should happen within defined limits. Don't play that in the house; no talking in the library; no ball games in the courtyard; no eating in the office… The flood of time brought forth by speed liberates the designer of space (the architect) from this function. Speed demands that anything can happen anywhere. The office now a site of leisure and play; the courtyard no longer a void for light but a filled space of controlled activity (markets, fairs, viral dances); the library as a place of loud creation, no longer quiet absorption; the home now the site of infinite broadcast and monetised actions – ad-lib comedy; communal gaming; conspicuous consumption; non-gratis advice; sponsored masturbation. Space becomes automatically universal, malleable, of unlimited behaviour, in this flux. All is temporary, nothing is permanent. That is the mantra, yet only because instability (via speed) has been made to seem so attractive in the manufactured ugliness of stability. The job for life? Monotonous! Boring! The forever home? Enslaving! Suffocating! The right to healthcare? Cumbersome! Paternalist! We hustle and rent and soldier-on, accumulating more debits in speed's tax… more invisible arrears. Space becomes automatically universal in this permanent flux. To remain constant in this game is to be an outsider.

The temporary in architecture was once the public's horror… the baselessness of the nomad; the inadequacy of the tent; the shame of the post-war crisis shelter… the temporary is now their only experience of architecture, its new necessity. A public immune to the precarity of short-term rents; of dangerous buildings; of the formally banal and spatially perfunctory. Architecture is now a luxury – a Birkin handbag unable to be counterfeited for the masses. When a population is so divided, 1 to 1000, between the haves and have nots – the temporary via speed is the only imperative. Economists, the markets, politicians spout a delicious,

devastating oxymoron. More Speed! Less Risk! An ever-faster, ever-safer (for them at least) version of speed as the insurers and lenders rub their hands. Yet faster, safer speed only ever leads to one destination. The same banal utopia at the end of multiple lines of converging sameness, of decreasing difference. A network stripped of place, space, and time. Infinite speed was once the hope of the West, now it is its only destination. Yet infinite speed in a finite world eventually leads to disaster. To remain constant in this game is to be an outsider.

Architecture only ever follows society, always catching up. We, architects (once chief builders, once building designers) have relinquished ourselves to the new masters of built time. Not the seafarer, the merchant, the banker, or the colonists, and not the tech-bro - but the developer, the main contractor, and the steel magnate. Yet for what? What did we get in return? 10, 20, 60 per cent reduction in CO2?! (why can no-one say for sure?); reduction in programme time; reduction in workload? What about quality (that nebulous term)? What about longevity? What about practice as the application of theory? What about knowledge applied? Knowledge is no longer power. Knowledge is too slow - only speed is power. And data now fuels speed. Data! Ever more Data! At any cost! Data is the primary tool – like human labour and machine labour before it – of capital expansion. And BIM (Building Information Modelling) that ocean of managed productised, componentised, rationalised data is the primary tool of capital in our game, in our sphere. To remain constant in this game is to be an outsider.

Repeatability, interoperability, componentry – these new terms, the dumb jargon of speed, define our world. Technology, data used only as a means of continuing, no valourising, the status quo or distracting and furnishing with novelty. Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, solely means to bamboozle and distract. The hardware and software of our labour employ us, they employ our wetware. The mouse, the dual screen, the headset, the Autodesk platform and the graphics card. Why did we set up like this? Why did we invest in this accumulatory speed? The insurance companies and mortgage lenders and product suppliers and developer and main contractors who sat on the government advisory boards that made the rules of the game we play, may well know the answer. More speed! Less risk! More profit. What mere designer – a software leasing, hardware borrowing, developer servicing designer – can compete? They no longer need us, 'designer' of buildings, because buildings no longer need designed. This is a long and eventful divorce that started with Alberti and the separation of building and drawing; thought and action; space and time.

And, now in a last ironic twist as our space down here becomes cancelled, fully discontinued, the new colonisers – the EV guy, the pumped-up book salesman, the BRICS bosses – are moving into Space, out there. It won't be long until we can no longer make sense of Space and time, out there either. To remain constant in this game is to be an outsider. Perhaps to remain constant, to rest outside the need for speed, is now our only hope.

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