No Strings Attached

JOHN RONAN

Everything has something to tell you if you know how to listen; even inanimate objects have a way of sending messages if you are sensitive to their language. For instance, I can't help but notice that it takes me three clicks to get to a menu on my smart phone to type a question mark, while the exclamation point is always ready at hand. This is good news for those who like to indicate a strong feeling, and when words alone simply will not do, but it is disconcerting for the more questioning among us. The anthropologist in me says that one can read a culture through its artifacts and that this is no mere coincidence. The keyboard is a designed object and someone at Apple researched which characters are used most often. If the exclamation point is easier to navigate to than a question mark, that is a deliberate decision, made for a good reason, and with data to back it up. So what is my phone trying to tell me?

It wasn't always this way. I am old enough to remember, just a couple of decades ago, using a typewriter to write book reports. On those rare occasions when I felt compelled to use an exclamation point, it wasn't on my keyboard at all. It had to be constructed out of separate characters: a period, then a backspace, then an apostrophe. This makeshift, apostrophe-over-a-period exclamation point took extra effort and was used only as a last resort. Constructing it was an admission of failure: if you were a good writer—precise and articulate—the implication was that you shouldn't need to use an exclamation point. It was relegated to the punctuation ghetto, and those who cobbled it together did so knowing the frown it would elicit from their English teachers.

Today, the exclamation point has achieved grammatical status once reserved only for the comma. It is sprinkled like confetti throughout written communication both high and low, its power diluted. No longer deemed sufficient to express shock, enthusiasm, or attitude on its own, exclamation points have been joined by emoticons assembled out of individual characters like the exclamation points of old. (It is likely just a matter of time until the happy face key is added to our keyboard's emotional repertoire).

How did the lowly exclamation point rise to such common currency, leaving the question mark and semicolon behind, and what does it tell us about our culture? What is behind the relatively sudden demand for exclamation points in the past twenty years?

It is clear by now that we are in the midst of a profound cultural transition from an industrial society to an information society. The old order, which was based on the collective and predicated on conformity—a world in which anonymous workers spent their lives banging out widgets in factories or as William Whyte's "organization men" in the corporate world—is rapidly receding, and a new social order is being born: one shaped by technology and based on the individual. Technology is performing creative destruction on our economy while promising a better future, free from the drudgery of the factory and the cubicle. This transformation represents a massive shift in what we do with our time, which we are already finding new ways to fill.

What people are doing with their new-found time (for the time being) is communicating. The same technology that has given rise to a new economic age has also given us more ways to interact. No longer restricted to the telephone and the letter, we now have an ever-expanding network of social media platforms from which to broadcast our opinions and our (curated) selves to the world. Society is turning us all into brand managers, and the brand is *Me*. Though we are arguably still as anonymous as any Fordist factory worker or Tokyo salary man, these new platforms for communicating offer us the illusion of difference: that we can all rise from the crowd to be a *somebody*.

But those who succumb to the siren song of this "selfie" culture discover that continuous self-curation is a demanding, time-consuming endeavor and quickly find themselves in a state of perpetual distraction—so busy communicating that they don't have time to think, and thus have nothing to say. The resultant social culture is a mind-numbing internet fog of half-baked thoughts and mindless self-reporting, which even multiple exclamation points and ALL CAPS can't manage to penetrate. Ennui ensues. Bored to distraction (or through distraction), the value of being amused rises to elevated status. As author Michael Crichton so astutely observed, entertainment becomes the culture's dominant operating mode:

> Today, everybody expects to be entertained, and they expect to be entertained all the time. Business meetings must be snappy, with bullet lists and animated graphics, so executives aren't bored….Politicians must have pleasing video personalities and tell us only what we want to hear. Schools must be careful not to bore young minds that expect the speed and complexity of television. Students must be amused—everyone must be amused, or they will switch: switch brands, switch channels, switch parties, switch loyalties….In other centuries, human beings wanted to be saved, or improved, or freed, or educated. But in our century, they want to be entertained. The great fear is not of disease or death, but of boredom. A sense of time is on our hands, a sense of nothing to do. A sense that we are not amused.[1]

---

1   Michael Crichton, *Timeline* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 430.

The evidence of this observation is all around us: the decline of the news reporter and the rise of the pundit (opinions are more entertaining than facts, after all); political discourse that mimics the theater of professional wrestling; the creepy voyeurism of "reality" television. All these describe a society which regards self-expression as its highest aim and reveres that which is outrageous or entertaining (i.e., whatever gets us clicking or tweeting). In this society the worst sin, and thus our greatest fear, is being boring.

Few fields of endeavor find themselves exempt from this cultural tide, and architecture is not one of them. Perhaps it is inaccurate to claim that architecture has devolved into a form of entertainment, but there is no denying the presence of this impulse in contemporary production. From even a cursory review of design publications in the last twenty years, it is clear that what is valued is that which is shocking or sensational—that which entertains us. One can debate the design media's complicity in this trend. Does it conflate "photogenic" with "important," or is it merely reporting objectively on a profession obsessed with formal innovation?

As technology liberated society, it also liberated the architect. In earlier times, the limits of technology gave architects of the modern period a common purpose; there was consensus in the profession on where the limits were and on what boundaries should be pushed. Those limits are gone. The last twenty years have definitively determined that, as global capital has combined with modern technology, anything is possible. But does this necessarily mean that *anything goes*? This liberation comes with strings attached: the removal of technical constraints has thrown the responsibility back to the individual architect. In the absence of a sense of collective endeavor it is now up to each of us, alone, to construct the value system that constrains our work.

Many avoid this challenge. In the short run, the opportunities afforded by new technology mean that anything that can be done will be done. The results of this "anything goes" mentality are all around us. Urban fabric is rendered through autonomous formal objects, each competing for attention by attempting to be more formally outrageous than the last,

like chattering pundits on a cable news shout-fest straining louder and louder to be heard. Architects are hired to serve essentially as exterior decorators, producing the illusion of difference through cosmetics, which belies a boring sameness underneath—the same old soap in a newer, sexier package. Like social media enthusiasts constantly communicating but with nothing to say, many architects today have created a world in which all is possible yet little has meaning: a kingdom of the arbitrary with dizzying formal rhetoric but no message—the perfect reflection of a society that regards the expression of the self as its highest aim.

As architects explore this new-found freedom, a simultaneous shift is occurring within the traditional power structures of the building industry. Amidst all this formal speculation, the architect's status is being slowly degraded. This is one of the great contradictions of our time: while never has interest in architecture been so prominent, never has the role of the architect been so marginalized. As if part of some corrupt bargain, architects have traded status for the pursuit of self-expression in the service of capital rather than the common good. Architecture is becoming synonymous with branding—a form of advertising—and buildings are now measured by their public relations value rather than their cultural value. As with any kind of advertising, this involves a loss of trust, a feeling that we are being sold something, and a sense that we are mere agents in a system that is essentially transactional in nature. Following social media's lead, *being noticed* is now marketable and is thus becoming an end in and of itself in all fields of design. Jasper Morrison's summary of contemporary product design could apply equally to architecture. "Design seems like a teenager to me: loud, in-your-face, attention-seeking, kind of quirky, immature."[2] Into this noisy and exciting world of ALL CAPS architecture come creeping doubts, and the more questioning types began to wonder: Why so much building but so few ideas? What contribution are architects making to the common good? What do we leave society once the novelty of form has worn off?

It is against this cultural backdrop that the Poetry Foundation project should be viewed.

---

2   Jasper Morrison, "Design seems like a teenager to me: An Interview with Jasper Morrison," *Vitra*, http://www.vitra.com/en-us/magazine/details/design-seems-like-a-teenager-to-me

I wanted the project for the Poetry Foundation to be different. Its design would deliberately cut across the grain of contemporary architectural design culture. It would be about relationships, not form, about experience, not image. I felt that too much of contemporary architecture was about getting *noticed*. Getting noticed is easy; more challenging is creating something that will be *remembered*. And what is remembered is that which is authentic, which makes a connection with someone on an emotional level—like a film that stays with you for days, or a piece of literature one can revisit and get something new out of with each reading. The building would not be a visual one-liner like so much contemporary architecture. Its spatial narrative would be its defining aspect; it would not be understood in a single glance or consumed in a single image. It would unfold slowly, rather—as foundation president John Barr remarked—space by space, like a poem unfolds line by line. Its intent would be not to shock or surprise but, like poetry, to intrigue and challenge, to draw visitors into a mysterious world where close attention is rewarded. It would ask questions rather than provide answers.

The best projects have an air of the unbelievable to them, and the Poetry Foundation project was no different. Like a make-believe project, conjured up for an academic studio course, it had all the elements plus an interesting back story: an heiress who gave a small fortune to create a "home" for poetry; the required programs of a library, performance space, exhibition gallery, and offices. What should a building dedicated to the art form of poetry be like?

The utterly uncommon thing about Ruth Lilly's out-of-the-blue gift to *Poetry* magazine was its stipulations—there were none. Typically, when a gift of these proportions is given there are restrictions put upon its use, but the magazine was free to do with the money as it chose, with no strings attached. Such an uncommon act of generosity demanded a unique response. Unlike a school or a house or an office building, there was no paradigm for a building of this kind, so one had the sense of embarking on a journey into the unknown. One of the program's more unusual requirements was for a garden space of some kind, so this became a point of departure for generating the design. Alternative
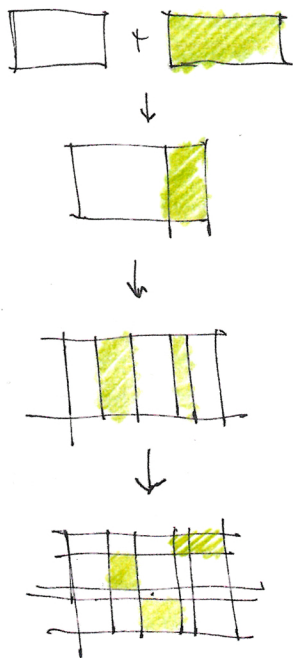
Building and garden combination strategy

strategies for combining a garden and building, such as knotting, over-lapping, interlocking, etc., were explored in diagrams. These diagrams were in turn tested on site with hand sketches and sketch models. The concept that emerged from this exploration was that of a garden created through the erosion of an implied volume described by the boundary of the "L" shaped site: a boundary that would be defined, physically, in such a way that the garden would become another "room" of the build-ing, internal to its organization and integral to its programs.

The foundation board was in agreement on most things but could not find consensus on one critical point: How public should the building be? Some felt it should be more private, a place where access is granted only after a formal request; others felt it should be accessible to the public. The design would mine this tension by placing the entrance away from the street, requiring visitors to walk through the garden, which would serve as a kind of filter. This created a deliberate ambiguity about the building in which the institution could be both public and private—open to anyone who was willing or intrigued enough to take the journey in. Visitors would enter through this outdoor room, which mediates between the street and the enclosed building—an urban, shared space belonging to the institution but also to the city. Public and private would thus not be absolute, but conditional upon inhabitation.

This kind of ambiguity, to which the project subscribes, is what Umberto Eco defines as the characteristic feature of the modern work. In describing the difference between traditional and modern literature, Eco states that traditional or classical works operate on a preferred read-ing and are essentially unambiguous (they *tell you what to think*) while modern works are deliberately ambiguous to allow multiple readings. Another way of stating this is to say that the role of the modern work is to raise questions. Thus the question of whether the Poetry Foundation is public or private, or whether the garden space belongs to the city or the foundation, becomes open to interpretation.

Visitors entering this urban room ascend two steps, leaving the sidewalk. This subtle change in elevation signals a sense of removal, an

entrance into another world. Once inside the project's urban boundary, the space begins to change; an undulating glass curtain wall compresses the space to create a narrow passage to the main garden area. In this narrow passage the material layers come close together and new relationships are created through the reflection of the screen wall on the opposing glass wall. Once inside the garden, the double-height library comes into view, announcing to visitors that they are entering a literary environment. Popular with casual visitors and neighbors, this outdoor room operates as something of an urban sanctuary, a place of reflec-tion and quiet contemplation where the distractions of modern life are stripped away. Sheltered by its perforated metal wall along the street, visitors feel simultaneously part of the city but also removed from it.

The building is conceived formally not as an object but as a series of independent, tectonic layers—in wood, glass, and metal—that con-verge and separate in a deliberate way to construct the building's spatial narrative, which visitors move through and between. The "building" is a result of the interplay between these layers and the source of the project's relational complexity.

The material palette is deliberately ordinary: concrete, plywood, and corrugated metal. The intent was to start with standard materials and make them transcendent or special in some way, akin to the way a poet uses familiar words to create poetry. A poet doesn't invent language, but selects and arranges words in such a way as to create something new, making language *strange* in a way that causes us to rethink what we thought we understood, or to uncover a truth hiding in plain sight. Likewise, the task of the architect is not primarily one of invention, but of arranging the elements that engender space in meaningful yet unexpected ways, inviting exploration and making us rethink relationships we thought were fixed.

The sandblasted concrete surface of the ground floor and garden highlights the material intentions of the building. Our task was to take this humble material and experiment with its recipe to transform it into something special. In a process lasting months, we began by select-ing the stone, looking at over fifty different combinations of aggregate

Concrete garden slab mock-up

before settling on the right mix, and then studying different sizes of the chosen stone mix. Once this variable was fixed, we experimented with different sands, cements, and admixtures (or lack thereof) to finalize the recipe in an iterative process involving hundreds of samples. After the final mix was determined, we experimented with different levels of sand-blasting, done by hand, to achieve the right texture. A large, full-size mockup was created on site to test the mix and all the different details that would be encountered. It is important to note that this process of investigation did not use technology to the exclusion of the tradesman. Though initiated and directed by the architect, it was conducted in part-nership with a concrete craftsman whose knowledge of working with the material was critical to our success.

This same iterative process was conducted, in parallel, with the other materials employed in the design. Birch plywood was selected for the wood layer because of its strength (it had to support books) as well as its humble status and natural character. Zinc was chosen for the corrugated metal screen wall for its purity, reflecting appropriately what I felt was poetry's un-debased status as an art form. To transcend its industrial origins, we oxidized the zinc metal to turn it black. This black color had important cultural connotations, which I felt were important to reference, suggesting both authority and mystery. Black—the color of judges and priests' robes, or the highest belt in martial arts—symbolized *Poetry* magazine's status, but also gave the building an enigmatic qual-ity meant to intrigue the passerby. The corrugated metal and its black color combined to give the building a certain ambiguous quality from the exterior—*ordinary* in some ways with its industrial metal cladding, yet *strange* in the urban context, with its dark, veil-like façade allowing glimpses into the layered spaces beyond.

The diaphanous qualities of the screen wall are conditional upon viewing angle and light qualities. Seen obliquely, the building looks monolithic and solid; viewed frontally, the screen wall becomes transpar-ent. Sunlight on the screen wall gives it more presence in the daytime, while at night the screen wall visually dissolves and recesses, allowing the artificially lit garden and interior spaces to become dominant.

The goal in designing the Poetry Foundation was to create an au-thentic experience: a serene atmosphere in which people enjoy spending time. Like literature or poetry, it uses language to tell a story, but is not *about* language. It is a sincere personal statement, but it is not about self-expression.

We live in a transitional time. Just as no one from the industrial world would return to the brutish agrarian age that preceded it, no one in the coming information age will long for the industrial one. The emerging information society will lead to a radically better way for us to live. Technology will improve and become easier to use, leveling the playing field across all areas of human endeavor. People will spend less time making the things that provide for daily existence, and more time and resources will go towards enhancing the human experiences that make life rewarding—our experience of the built environment not least among them. These are challenging and exciting times but the future is setting up nicely for architects. It is important we be ready with something to say.

If architects want to play more than a marginal role in the formation of this new society and do something meaningful with our lives, we need to figure out what really matters, for a rewarding life in architecture does not come from making monuments of self-expression. It does not come from making sexy images or funny shapes. It comes from creating some-thing of value through the integration of technique with a personal vision of social meaning. Being an architect is about doing good work that means something, creating authentic experiences that enhance people's daily lives, and making spaces with which people form meaningful bonds. It is more about something you feel than something you see. It is less about the things that change—like style and form—and more about the things that don't change. It is not a transaction; it is an invitation that asks nothing in return and to which there are no strings attached.