

The inspiration of art in architecture



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The essay investigates the inspiration of art in architecture and the links and interchanges between them in the late sixties and early seventies with emphasis on the exchanges between conceptual art and architecture. The basic assumption of the essay is that the rigorous conceptualisation that characterised conceptual artist was transferred into some advanced architectural practices during the late sixties and early seventies. It also discusses about the parameters on which the inspirations are carried further to design process in terms of project conditions. During this process of transforming the art to a design, it passes through the process of adding architectural characteristics. So the essay seeks, how further is the design taken and if it still has the essence of the original art from which it was inspired. The text examines relations and differences between artist Sol Lewitt and architect Peter Eisenman in reference with a few of Eisenman's past works and argues that this discussion is still relevant to current

practices exploring the potentials of digital based design through the use of parametrics, scripting etc.

INTRODUCTION

“ Design should do the same thing in everyday life that art does when encountered : amaze us, scare us or delight us, but certainly open us to new worlds within our daily existence.” 1 – Aaron Betsky

While both art and design can perform a similar role, there is a distinct difference between the two. Art is unladen by boundaries, whereas design takes on the added responsibility of performing a function. The challenge of design is to try and meet the lofty ideals of art while remaining utilitarian. The artist’s work freed from practicality is more agile and able to freely explore concepts and ideas that will open us to new worlds. Artists are the scientists who research and test concepts; designers are the engineers who translate those discoveries into everyday life.

Architects, as designers of spaces, can learn valuable lessons from artists. The same principles that have been tested and found successful in art can become a part of the built environment. Why not have colorful buildings that explode organically like Dale Chihuly’s glass works? i1

If nothing else, looking at art should remind architects of the artistic possibilities of architecture. This is especially important today, when architecture tends too heavily toward utility.

CONCEPTUAL ART

“ I will refer to the kind of art in which I am involved as conceptual art. In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator, and therefore usually he would want it to become emotionally dry. ” 2 – Sol Lewitt

By Conceptual art I mean work that firstly makes the “ immaterial” ideas that define its artistic concepts and than secondary its object status and method of production. By conceptual architecture I mean that work which tries to do what conceptual art does while retaining some of the distinctive characteristics of architecture.

Sol Lewitt (1928-2007) was a painter and sculptor who helped establish Conceptualism as a dominant art movement in the post war era. He was chosen for this study, first and foremost, because he had a similar relationship with his works that an architect does; he planned the pieces but entrusted their execution to others. This distance meant his works were less dependent on rendering techniques to be successful. In this regard, his works are a step closer to architecture than many artists. Another reason LeWitt was selected was his interest in a conceptual art, rather than a

perceptual art. The way his pieces looked was important, but not as important as the concept that created them. Architecture deals with environments, which are inherently perceptual, so moving to a conceptual understanding of architecture, seemed to be an interesting challenge and worthwhile pursuit.

Many of Sol LeWitt's works were never seen by the artist until their exhibition. As an artist he was revolutionary in that he rarely executed his own works, simply because it was unnecessary. Sol LeWitt's written instructions for his wall murals are specific about how they are to be produced. For LeWitt, the role of the artist is to create the concept not the object, or in other words, the concept is the art.

Applying the idea of a conceptual art to architecture can be a significant challenge. The wellknown American architect and theorist Peter Eisenman explains the challenges succinctly:

“ It is possible to say that while a conceptual art and a conceptual architecture could be similar in an idea state, there is an inherent difference when it comes to the realized object. Where a conceptual art object can remain in a more pure state, for example as a mathematical notation, built architecture takes on cultural, pragmatic, and semantic references. Thus the conceptual aspect of an architecture cannot be defined by what is conceptual in, say, painting and sculpture.” 11

These thoughts are mirrored by Sol LeWitt: “ Architecture and three-dimensional art are of completely opposite natures. The former is concerned with making an area with a specific function. Architecture, whether it is a

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work of art or not, must be utilitarian or else fail completely. Art is not utilitarian. When three-dimensional art starts to take on some of the characteristics, such as forming utilitarian areas, it weakens its function as art.” 12

Is it then inappropriate to create architecture based solely on concept? Especially when the utility of the space is compromised? If utilitarian concerns are allowed to alter or compromise a space, both Eisenman and LeWitt would agree that work is no longer conceptual. To avoid compromising the artistic concept both LeWitt and Eisenman have decided to make art instead of architecture. The difference being that Eisenman insists on using buildings as his medium; buildings which must to some extent lend themselves to the uses for which they were constructed. By turning his back conceptually on utility, and yet allowing it to happen, his concepts are polluted by the interference.

“ Conceptual art is not necessarily logical. The logic of a piece or series of pieces is a device that is used at times, only to be ruined. Logic may be used to camouflage the real intent of the artist, to lull the viewer into the belief that he understands the work, or to infer a paradoxical situation (such as logic vs. illogic). Some ideas are logical in conception and illogical perceptually. The ideas need not be complex. Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple.” 16

The interesting thing is that this irony is really the only meaningful substance behind the work. When LeWitt talks about wanting the viewer to understand the concept behind the work, it appears that “ the concept” is simply the set

of rules that guided the actions. Discovering the rules is certainly “mentally interesting”, but only represents another layer of subjective decisions front loaded into the project. This superficial level of “meaning” can be seen in the work of several contemporary architects including Peter Eisenman’s superimposed lines of influence.

Conceptual art’s focus on process during the ’60s was an attempt to banish a number of conventions around the work of art: art as reified totem, art as static shape, aesthetic formalism, the manual contribution of the artist to the work, and so on. However, the invocation of art in architecture had a rather different series of concerns. For instance, Peter Eisenman’s citation of process art practices in his early house projects, while invoking LeWitt’s ideas, was ultimately attempting to mimic his forms.

Conceptual architecture during the ’70s thus neatly overlapped the International Style, minimalist aesthetics, and conceptual art strategies. Borrowing from Sol LeWitt’s and Lawrence Weiner’s arguments on the primacy of the generating idea over its material properties, Eisenman’s notion of an “autonomous” architecture privileging form over construction gained currency in critical and academic circles.

Sol LeWitt here describes his distinction between art and architecture: “Architecture and three-dimensional art are of completely opposite natures. The former is concerned with making an area with a specific function. Architecture, whether it is a work of art or not, must be utilitarian or else fail completely. Art is not utilitarian. When three-dimensional art starts to take on some of the characteristics of architecture such as forming utilitarian

areas it weakens its function as art. When the viewer is dwarfed by the large size of a piece, this domination emphasizes the physical and emotive power of the form at the expense of losing the idea of the piece." In other words, art that becomes utilitarian does not make it "architectural," only less convincing as art; similarly, architecture that denies its utilitarian, practical nature is weak architecture.

In answering these questions I have sought to investigate and elaborate upon a previously recognised correlation between Eisenman's work and that of conceptual artists, Sol LeWitt in particular. The introduction of conceptual art raises issues of value in respect of the finished piece. That is it would seem that in work of a conceptual nature, the 'idea', can only be hindered by the existence of a final piece. The question that often arises is why, given the conflict it causes, bring the 'idea' to a physical reality? If, as is usually the case, it is deemed necessary to realise the object what, if anything, should accompany the work to facilitate its understanding?

During this period we find a particular fruitful exchange of ideas between artist and architects that is still relevant to current aesthetic thinking. The focus here is mainly on the architectural consequences and potentials of these exchanges (1). It is possible to argue that an unbroken lineage of architectural thinking and designing runs right up to today. A number of current architectural practices that explores digitally based working methods seems to face some of the same conceptual and aesthetic challenges that conceptual artist such as for instance Sol Lewitt was exploring. The article will attempt to point out some of the still active and relevant questions. The aim of this investigation is not only to give an accurate account of a

historically situated set of ideas. It is just as much a starting point for an artistic development work that is fuelled by the investigations. This work is briefly presented at the end of the article. It is not to be seen as a solution or a conclusion to the questions that is raised during the article. The aim is rather to suggest an approach to architectural research that includes academic as well as design based research without one part being seen as a justification for the other, but hopefully rather instigates a productive gap between the two.

“ What makes architecture conceptual is that unlike art, it demands not only the primacy of intention to take something from the sensual to the intellectual realm, but also that this intention be present in the conceptual structure; again, whether it is built or not, is not at issue. ” 1 – Peter D. Eisenman

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This section explores three concepts integral to the work of Sol LeWitt: Concept, Series, and Reductivism.

“ In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work.

When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and

decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.”

– Sol LeWitt

Ulrik Schmidt has described the characteristics of minimal art as ‘ objectivity, non-illusionism and reality, an abstract-concrete appearance as well as non-expressionism and non-anthropomorphism’ using ‘ principles of unity and uniformity, non-relationalism, instrumentalisation and, more profoundly, repetition’. (2) Schmidt traces a desubjectivation in minimalist art. he describes an approach to the work of art where the artist withdraws from directly influencing the work of art, creating, as Lewitt states it, a situation where ‘ all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair’. Through much modernist thinking runs an interest in objectivisation. Minimal art could be seen as the logic-and extreme-conclusion of some of modernisms basic assumptions, as well as an inherent criticism of these assumptions. (3) To a certain extent one might claim that this separation of conceptualisation and execution is how architects have been working at least since the academisation of architecture in the renaissance, when architects became detached from the directly involvement in the realisation of the works they designed. obviously the minimal arts movement investigates the consequences of this separation of conception and execution much further than the average architect, but it might still be one of the reasons for the prolific transfer of ideas from minimal art to architecture. Another reason could be that the formality and use of geometry that one find in the practices of artist such as Sol Lewitt or Robert Morris might have certain affinities to architecture. In any case there

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seems to be a parallel interest in conceptually articulated, systematic manipulations of form of these artists and the architectural designs of Peter Eisenman and likeminded architects such as John Hejduk, Michael Graves and Richard Meier during the late sixties and early seventies. There are for instance obvious common traits between Lewitt's art and Eisenman's architecture (Werner Petersen 1990: 19).

Lewitt's drawings and sculptures are generated through rule based, straightforward transformations of simple geometrical figures. The series of transformed figures are systematically organised in matrixes that conclusively describes all the possible combinations of the operations. In this way the works of Lewitt seems to explore a dilemma between the transparent logic of the formal operations and the apparent purposelessness of the result. Everything about the process is explained and understandable and yet the result seems to be without inherent meaning, at least if meaning is understood as a specific insight or sensibility expressed through the work.

Something similar characterises Peter Eisenman's early projects. They are perhaps less abstract, as they are based on a recognisable modernistic vocabulary utilising the formal analyses Eisenman made of modernist architects such as Terragni (Eisenman 2003). But the complex decomposition of Eisenman basically explores a similar and deliberate lack of inherent meaning, even though the projects are at once paraphrasing, praising and mocking their modernist heritage.

It seems to be an important point that the processes and transformational logic is readable in the work. In Sol Lewitt's 'Variations of incomplete open

cubes' from 1974, every possible combination of the open cube is constructed and presented in a comprehensive scheme that makes it possible for anyone who would care to check, that all variations are present. This inclusive logic, where every possible variation of a finite series of possibilities is present without differentiation, is a way to eliminate any form of subjective choice or design decision from the realised work.

One finds a similar logic in Eisenman's early architecture. 'house II' from 1969-70 uses a nine-square grid that allows for a highly systematised series of transformations and superimpositions of columns, walls and volumes within the grid. Eisenman's design process is obviously more complex than Lewitt's. In Lewitt's art pieces the ordering principle is mostly immediately readable. It points didactically to the logic that has constructed the piece. Eisenman's process is more convoluted and probably only directly traceable by referring to the laborious complex drawings that accompany the published project, even though the realised project displays obvious traces of the process. This complexity might be partly relating to the requirements of a habitable structure. But more importantly it is probably related to an exploration of the syntax of architectural space. For Eisenman geometry is not an abstract spatial system. It is already imbedded within an architectural tradition and Eisenman uses the systematic spatial transformations to break down preestablished notions of spatial organisation in architecture. (4)

Sol Lewitt seems to employ a more innocent notion of geometry. In his work geometry seems to be perceived as an abstract system devoid of connotations. It mainly serves as a vehicle that allows general conceptual ideas to enter into physical form. The properties and rules of geometry make

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it possible to develop and translate general principles. Lewitt's frequent use of cubes might be understood as part of this approach. The orthogonal angles and equal length of the sides of the cube does not refer to an idealised geometry, but is rather considered as a default option uninfluenced by specific conditions or contexts. The white colours and anonymous materials further support this idea, hinting at standardisation and industrialised production. But even if this idea is easily understandable one could question whether Lewitt is successful in completely breaking any connotations and relations. The cubes might after all still refer to previous notions of a relation between ideal geometries and meaningful form—a frequent belief throughout the history of architecture. Even if these connotations are unintended by Lewitt, the vague recognisability might still be an important part of the fascination of his work. (5)

The project that accompanies this article is part of an ongoing research by design project by the author. It could be thought of as a conclusion to the text. In this case it would of course not be understood as a summation of the findings of the paper and putting these findings into perspective of already existing research. It would rather be a conclusion in terms of trying to establish a relation between an analysis of and reflection on an existing body of work and a new work that tries to explore and expand some of the findings of the analysis. In this way the accompanying project could be considered as a continuous exploration of some of the conceptual and formal questions raised in Lewitt and Eisenman's works. The work is based on a formal exploration of a nine-square grid. This exploration is structured on a combinatorial series of objects based on an adapted 'menger sponge'—

principle (Fig. 1)6. Instead of removing the central cube of each nine square grid in each step as in the original menger sponge, the project removes a different number of cubes in every iteration. This logic can be explored in different ways. Fig. 2 describes a transformative series based on three iterations where the first iteration removes two cubes, the next four and the last one. In this case it is possible to remove four cubes in 12 different ways from the nine-square grid (with the precondition that the variations are limited to those that are symmetrical along a vertical axis). This produces a series of 12 different cubic objects (Fig. 3) that unfolds the possible variations. This series is then in turn one of a series of the six possible ways the three iterative levels can be combined (1-2-4, 1-4-2, 2-1-4, 2-4-1, 4-1-2 and 4-2-1) resulting in 72 different objects (see Figs. 4-6 for examples).

It is using the didactic approach of Lewitt where the formative logic is immediately accessible and readable. Instead of Peter Eisenman's critical dissection of the formal syntax of modernist architecture or Lewitt's exploration of the concept as artistic motor it attempts to explore the proliferation of formal organisations made possible by systematised processes. The resulting objects are just as purposeless as Lewitt's sculptures. But at the same time the cubic shapes and hierarchically nested geometries hopefully hint at architectural or perhaps rather protoarchitectural potentials.

CASE STUDIES

Peter Eisenman You would be better qualified to answer that question than I would. The energy of Terragni permeated my early work; House I is certainly <https://assignbuster.com/the-inspiration-of-art-in-architecture/>

Terragni, but House II is much more influenced by, say, Rosalind Krauss's writing on contemporary art at the time and the idea of sculpture in the expanded field and the work of minimalist sculptors Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt. By House II, Krauss and I were working closely-she eventually wrote "Notes on the Index" in October 3 and 4, which became key to House IV.

The Wexner Center at Ohio State University by Peter Eisenman is an example of a building that exhibits characteristics motivated by the framework of the kit-of-parts problem. It is a spatially complex building that discounts the material facts of the architecture except as they serve as "signs." The richly overlapping spaces, whether implied by frames or planes, are all defined by painted gypsum board and off-the-shelf acoustic ceiling systems. Brick is selectively deployed to allude to pre-existing buildings on the site (in a series of faux ruins), but not for its material qualities and uses. The program content of the building is not the driver of design development; the form of the building is instead a result of the selective mapping of "physical forces" on the site, resulting in an itinerary that is choreographed both outside and inside the building. The overlap of competing spatial systems is generated by two axes that exist on the campus; the program/content and the constructional logic play relatively minor roles in the design. Perhaps it is the relative disregard for the quality of the building materials and details that make the Wexner Center so decidedly postmodern in character today.

Whether the underlying moti

Series

“ Serial compositions are multipart pieces with regulated changes. The differences between the parts are the subject of the composition. If some parts remain constant it is to punctuate the changes.” 22

– Sol LeWitt

The primary method of communicating the concept in Sol LeWitt’s work is the use of series. By presenting objects in series, any difference between the objects immediately becomes the focus of the piece. If three forms are equal in all aspects, with the exception of height, the viewer automatically assumes that the height is the focus.

Works in series can really only be appreciated when viewed together as a series. A direct application within architecture therefore would most naturally happen with a group of buildings in close proximity. This may be on the scale of a college campus, a business park, or several small structures on a residential lot. The difficulty is that most architecture is developed on the basis of a single building at a time. Where more than one building is employed the scale of projects may make it difficult to discern the variations. It may be necessary to introduce smaller scale elements, such as building details, which provide clues about the larger moves within the grouping.