

The Fall of Bilbao

Long-standing certainty meets situational truths: contemporary architectural practice and its re-positioning within the socio-political landscape; by Markus Miessen

Stoicism is founded on the interconnection of a universe that is administered by absolute laws. From these laws, humans are to develop their reason and moral code by which they are to live by. The practical ethics of Stoicism emphasise self-control, assuming a context of political uncertainty that suggests the need for permanence and stability propelled by commitment and virtue, which is to be achieved by living in moderation. Throughout history, a great number of intellectuals have been servants of power, a few of them attempting to use their privilege to help others dismantle illegitimate practices.

Arguably, the most dilettante reading of Stoicism is that of figuring out where the world is going and, as a result, to follow willingly. This, of course, raises a fundamental question: how does one lead a life of moral agency if everything was right from the start? Looking inwards by building up an inner fortress against the outside world also lays bare the tendency to suppress issues of real significance in favour of habit, one that consciously avoids reality. But are we holding on to things that are no longer worth holding onto?

Within architecture, one can trace a similarly therapeutic relationship, where practice cocoons itself in reason that, within the bigger picture, seems meaningless. For centuries formal debate has dominated a practice that creates physical envelopes and a discourse that concentrates on the nurturing of the ego-cult rather than participating in the socio-political environment.

Stoicism suggests an absence of interference. In opposition, one could argue that friction, the suspension of rational logic and the amateurish triggers from external influences often generate the most creative ideas. Instead, adopting preconceived models of ethics based on absolute heritage, architects often refuse to question what an ethical practice actually is. Meanwhile, small-minded warriors of limited vision have cried out that the world is lost. And in desperation, like shipwrecked sailors grasping at wreckage, they cling to the past. As a *modus vitae* 20th-century architects have often followed the grand narratives of history, obeying the objects of their

predecessors while worshipping the architectural object as a generator for change. Strangely, this happened at a time when it was already evident that the city was being conditioned by forces that supersede the formal and aesthetic prerogatives of the architect.

It is often implied that modern materials and methods are dictating contemporary architecture's expression of form – resulting from the state of mind typical of an epoch – and that architecture exists and takes form only at that very moment when a general evolution of mind is accomplished. But rather than simply articulating a re-reading of material processes, one can trace an emerging practice that illuminates the existence beyond a single truth in a radicality that challenges space rather than controls it: an emerging architectural sub-culture with a spatial understanding that suspends the traditional reading of architecture as simply the spatial manifestation of built matter. It challenges the obeying of conventions and institutions that defy the very creation of architecture and its creators with their illusion of control. In contrast to the self-referential object, which has been churned out for centuries, some recent projects attempt to understand processes of uncertainty, of which the city, as the ultimately unplannable object, consists of. This major change presents us with a reading of the world that is based on re-evaluated judgement according to specific situations, a world in need of an optimistic and critical rendering of situational truths as opposed to moral truism.

If one was to engage with Stoicism in the sense of spatial politics, one realises that the Stoic is primarily interested in keeping his or her own house in order. From the urban-stoic reading of Robert Venturi's "Learning from Las Vegas" (MIT Press, 1977), who essentially described a philosophy of the marketplace, to the urban-nostalgic rendering of Colin Rowe, the primary issue of interest seems to be the underlying question of how conversation, both in the literal and metaphoric sense, is being influenced by landscape. If one discusses the implications of Stoic philosophy in spatial terms, one has to make sure not to mistake Stoic strategies in architecture for Stoic architecture. Stoic architecture – as in built form – does not exist; it is rather the framework in which certain practitioners operate that could be labelled 'Stoic'. Moreover, there has at no point in history been a serious spatial attempt in terms of outlining ethical space, because ethical space in its philosophical and ideological narrative has so far functioned as a theoretical construct only. One has to acknowledge that what has recently emerged, as an attempt in socio-political spatial practice, is a technique of understanding spatial situations as local

microenvironments, which obey specific rules and mechanisms. What seems imperative to appreciate is that the difference between a conventional understanding of architecture – which implies that architecture is a space controlled by the architect – and the emerging practitioner, is the latter's interest in open mechanisms adaptable to change, systems that deal with organisational structure in site-specific ways.

Where the Stoic understands the environment as a world beyond control that can only be dealt with by leading an introverted practice driven by virtue, the contemporary protagonist equally appreciates the world as a place beyond control, but one that refuses the modernist instrument of the grand account. Here, the fundamental difference is that a 'world beyond control' is understood as a quality. Today, these spaces of uncertainty are often understood as places where subtle interaction creates informal, self-organisational forces that generate spatial constructs on a local scale. Instead of creating spaces of controlled physical representation and spectacle, they expose an emerging understanding of architecture based on the absent object. Rather than being interested in the development of empty sites into well-defined developed places – an ambition that implies there is a future final product, a 'perfect city' as a result of visionary planning – focus is set on the notion of the city as an everyday environment that unpredictably responds to differently scaled interventions. It instigates thinking about an alternative urban practice: a realistic understanding of the existing that celebrates change. It is this pro-active philosophy that sets the contemporary apart from the Stoic.

Architecturally speaking, one could say that the difference in practice can be understood through the age-old technique of perspective drawing. Where conventional practice attempted to translate its spatial desire through the means of visual perspective, some contemporary projects can no longer be expressed using the same technique. A perspective is supposed to be an objective representation of space, allowing the outsider to understand how a specific space is outlined and supposedly functions. However, a lot of recent projects resist the notion of being transformable into representational perspective, because their nature is paramount to the visually representable object. Whereas the majority of traditional architectural projects is engaged with the experience from the outside, those politically charged protagonists are concerned with the experience from the inside, that is not to say spatial interior, but the inside of an applied system. The experiential difference also points at the dissimilarity in the approach of formal reference: where the

traditional architect is interested in sustaining a culture – an egomania regarding the creation of a signature style – the emerging practitioner refuses this self-referential typology as one detached from place, culture and geopolitics. Opposing an approach of technological development and an image of universality advocated by the modern movement, such a practitioner resists the pure colonisation of territory and propels a holistic reading of the social, political and spatial environment upon which differently scaled mechanisms of change are being applied.

Based on theories of economic exchange, today's spatial practice utilises experiment linked to conditions of urbanity and applies (non-)physical components in order to alter specific settings. It presents both the developed notion of experimental techniques and the application of analytical thought, which transform everyday ephemera and physical conditions. Taking such understanding into consideration, one also has to rethink the way that a certain discourse is being led in the academies. If we were, for a moment, to pretend that a purely formal discourse was non-existent, even most of the apparently phenomenologically, sociologically or politically motivated academic studios are still trading on the past: their internalised discourse is rarely more than incestuous formal polemics.

The image of the architect has often been related to the male heroic protagonist who introduces to the outside an established lifestyle. It is precisely here that one can locate the turning point in practice: the neglect of egocentric narrative and self-referential ambition in favour of catering for a particular, site-specific public. Such altruistic appreciation of what architecture can possibly be opposes individualism and raises the fundamental question of whether or not architecture should be taken forward as an art practiced by and for the sake of a broader cultural landscape or a commercial enterprise geared to the needs of the market. The highly romanticised ideal of the architect – 'general progress in architecture according to a personal conception, usually of style, embodied in buildings and developed from architect to architect over the course of history' (Andrew Saint, *The Image of the Architect*, Yale University Press, 1983), which essentially derived from Aristotelian idealism – is no longer valid. Today, one has to appreciate the difference between the 'architecture of image' and what one might call 'post-Bilbao' practice. The starting point for this shift could arguably be identified as the moment when Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao opened in 1997. As the tail end of 20th-century architectural superstars, Gehry became the epitome of a generation that set out to be part of an avant-garde and

ended up as a highbrow, copy–paste establishment. One could argue that the moment when Bilbao was born, an emerging generation of architects started to critically engage with the lack of 20th-century Western Modernism and what the course of Modernism and Postmodernism had avoided dealing with: the manipulation of archetypical situations. In contrast to the process of pure image production, these new practitioners no longer operate on the -ism level. Although it is true that such anti-image is yet another ideological position that creates an image, the difference here is the way in which the protagonists act, network and shift interests: suddenly, peripheral areas have become the focal point. Unburdened by the weight of the 20th century, they have rediscovered a localism based on the belief that certain problems need tailor-made solutions rather than philosophically outsourced meta-agendas. This specific kind of problem solving has abandoned an understanding of architecture for the sake of the stylised object propelled by virtuous vision. Today, if one is working on a project dealing with the West Bank, the project is most likely to take into consideration an open-source involvement with its cultural and geopolitical heritage. In contrast to the late 20th-century project of ‘the diagram’ – which was purely modern in the sense that it attempted to deliver a personal, scientific solution to a problem that was being put forward by cancelling out everything else – ‘post-Bilbao’ has started to generate a discourse that acknowledges the political implications of space as something which urgently needs to be dealt with. As so many other theories and practices in history, the diagram was a stoic cocoon. Rather than a simple fashion, it dwelt on the image of the architect as the master of virtue, the master who cannot fail. As a container of the heroic tradition supported by self-image, the diagram – in its purely modern sense that it was playing with the age-old, prevailing image of the architect as impeccable master – was an intellectual claim only. But today, we work under a different ideological system, a scenario that is contingent, informal, ephemeral and resists the notion of pure object-lust. There is no longer any sympathy with the stoic, self-referential and masturbatory notion of the diagram when, post Internet and 9/11, everyone realises that the rest of the world is burning.

Since we are arguably at a turning point in the history of spatial practice – the junction where egotistic ambition is being separated from ambitious vision – we should actively engage with the current optimism regarding society as both a human and spatial construct. It is not the glorious virtue of the dead, but the eradication of the desire to be remembered that ambitiously prepares ground for change. Rather than mourning the passing of the old codes, it is time to venture out

into the snowstorm. This is the tragic moment of realisation, in which the Stoic faces the deadlock of stable harmony as the epitome of nihilism.