WAAC studio themes

1) urban housing: the meeting of the private & the public realm;
2) institutions of memory/learning;
3) edges and perimeters: locations of departure or arrival;
4) places of transcendence/ prayer.

Response of the seminar on metalepsis (Kunze)

Metalepsis is the main theme of the seminar, which means that there is a lot of consideration of how metaphor is operative and actual within the construction and understanding of architecture. Metalepsis reveals a curious potentiality within the Vitruvian “virtues,” utilitas, firmitas, and venustas. These have been variously interpreted, but metalepsis would compare utility and “firmness” (let’s say structure, knowing in advance that it means many things relating to support, accommodation, professional duties, etc.) to a Lucretian flow of activities and the material and institutional/cultural supports that keep the flow moving evenly without turbulence (clinamen). The traffic model works well to describe stability: six lanes of vehicles moving in the same direction along a super-highway are motionless to each other and constitute a dynamic balance. Venustas is the “odd one out,” both in the history of the worship of Venus (beyond or at the edge of the city) and the mythic contexts that tell of the traditionally disruptive effects of Eros. (The tale of Cupid and Psyche is informative.)

Venustas takes us to the margin or boundary, just as Hermes negotiates complex interactions that facilitate a perpetually silent trade at crossings. These are not the rusty remainders of poetic ways of thinking but candid evidence of cultural universals still operating within the machinery of the everyday. The “erotic” nature of boundary behavior is central to human use of the environment, today as in ancient times. So, when we attempt to envision the relations of private and public, we run into the same complex events that have been experienced since the dawn of humanity. Even popular culture attests, often naively, about the “cross inscription” that makes even a monk’s cell subject to the idea of the public, and every crowd a place of paradoxical privacy.

Architects draw plans in a space that is transitive: neutral, representationally flat (i.e. drawable), and available to instrumental relations. At the same time, they know that use is not transitive but, rather, topological. Metalepsis shows how these two worlds co-exist, though not without producing “sites of exception” where the differences are made apparent. These sites amount to swerves (clinamen) within the Lucretian evenly regulated flow of needs and responses, utilitas and firmitas. Such sites are critical to our political sensibility, our awareness of collective humanity. In particular, sites of exception are devoted to resisting ideological “smoothness,” as where the policeman says “Move on, nothing to see here.”

Architecture, the “objective art” par excellence, is simultaneously subjective, in that it is for and by both subjects and subjectivity in general. Its professional and esthetic aspiration is to “support” subjectivity, even without being able to articulate just what this subjectivity is. Subjectivity
is a project requiring special focus and mental discipline. It is appropriate for those who pursue advanced degrees, because it aspires to make explicit what architectural practice is satisfied to leave in the form of tacit presuppositions. “Making explicit” is the obligation of pedagogy and reflective thought, but not a requirement for professional practice. In this special backstage of everyday professional practice, the aim is to find those ideas that most effectively and efficiently uncover essential truths without simplifying or distorting what has actually happened in history or culture. Thus, “system” in theoretical inquiry means both an inclusiveness — not leaving out the full, rich variety of human behaviors and thoughts — and a precision and economy that attempts to “explain the most” with the fewest concepts.

Theoretical economy stands for the self-regulation of thought, embodied in the refusal to continue inventing ideas without caring for consistency. Following the Gödelian principle, if it is impossible to be complete, it is necessary to be consistent. “System” thus means that theory must strive to not contradict itself, and in doing this it aims precisely at the phenomenon of contradiction that abounds in human action and thought. Contradiction, as in the Cretan Liar’s Paradox (the Cretan who claims that “All Cretans are liars”) arises in a fundamental way out of boundary conditions. If the speaker is inside the box of the claim but claims also to be outside the box (i.e. making the claim), a true-false condition arises. If the speaker is telling the truth, then he/she is inside the box, but then the box means that he/she is not telling the truth, etc. etc. Theory takes up this true-false as a constitutive principle. Its boundary is not simple (transitive) but rather topologically complex (intransitive). The intransitive boundary allows the postponement of the predication by which the Cretan tries to first include him/herself and later tries to exclude. When the predication reverses, from true to false, it is the reversal and delay that interest us as theoreticians. This is the phenomenon of metalepsis.

So, when we look at conditions of privacy and public space, the edges and lines of arrival and departure, and places of transcendence, we see that reversal and delay — and, hence, metalepsis — are central to any study. And, when we study actual places of learning and memory — in particular the “memory places” of the 16th and 17th centuries — we see reversal and delay employed directly and materially. Again, metalepsis shows how this is done. Evidence from examples that are otherwise independent of any one culture or period of history are especially valuable, because they point to a “system” operating within all cultures and times. Their system and theory’s system must correlate for theory to claim its objectivity and truth. Metalepsis is one way of writing this truth.

I take a specific stand on how theory can have access to this kind of correlation. My view is that subjectivity is unknowable outside the context of the “clinic” that Sigmund Freud developed and Jacques Lacan corrected as a model of the subjectivity of the “language animal,” the human. This is not meant to exclude the contributions of the myriad others who have contributed to the idea of the clinic. Clinic does not mean the psychiatric hospital clinic but, rather, the human being as an individual who nonetheless embodies the whole of his/her culture but gives evidence of this culture by means of symptoms that, specifically and structurally, conceal the structure of subjectivity. Symptoms are
revealed through discourse, but discourse comes in many forms: art, architecture, literature, film, popular culture. If we look at the world in any way, we see discursive structure and evidence of the symptom, i.e. subjectivity evident through contrasts of visibility and invisibility — hence the need to talk about form of virtuality.

Theory is not wantonly abstract. Its aim is to clarify and understand, in terms that can be understood by anyone with an interest. Yet, theory must resist being appropriated by various false aims: such as the drive to simplicity in order to “market” itself to a broad public; such as the perceived need to support and defend professional practice; such as the need to give alibis confirming judgments of what is good and bad in architecture. Theory must resist these temptations and remain objective; at the same time theory is largely about resistance, as in the resistance of the complex intransitive boundary to be represented as simple and transitive. It is not true that the relation between private and public is a “simple” wall. In this sense no wall has ever been simple. The physical artifact can often, through its materiality and historical use, testify to its complexity, as in the case of the wall of the Temple in Jerusalem, where the architectural ruin and the hope of prayer are directly combined; or in the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, where memory, anamorphosis, and the idea of visiting to the underworld are brought together unconsciously through the correct functioning of architectural details.

Reductionism in theory is inherently wrong, but not wrong in the aspiration to explain complexity in direct, testable ways. Without testing — construction of conditions where predicted outcomes can be played out and proved true or false — theory becomes simply commentary. Testing for the complexity of subjectivity is based on coincidence, and so theory attempts to collect as many “unrelated examples” as possible, examples for which there is no prior reason why any similarities should exist. This is why architecture theory must include other forms of art, literature, and popular culture. My advocacy for the “symptoms of the clinic” is qualified by saying that, for architecture theory, the clinic is the world of coincidence.

How do we know what we mean when we say “boundary,” “public,” “prayer,” or other terms involved with such statements of themes? We know only as much as the symptoms of subjectivity in general can tell us, and of these we can know only what we have put to the test in ways that are personally convincing and publically explainable. Theory, despite its intimate relation to our privately held convictions and experience, must also be a part of the discourses it studies and uses as frameworks. This “Janusian” quality evolves into the form of the dialectic, a continual exposure and “test-to-failure” of each idea and example. There is no way out of theory’s inherent intimacy — this is what I mean by calling the theorist an “idiot,” because the original meaning of “idiot” was “private person.” Neither is there a way out of the responsibility of theory to explain itself, to find terms and methods that are open to public scrutiny. Theory must renounce the “alibi,” the retreat to a historical period, a single culture, a specialty, a false vocabulary of opaque generalities. Specificity is required to find the sites where theory can construct proofs; it cannot be a smokescreen for the construction of alibis.