Intensity vs. Density

Today, the question of density arises amidst a perceptible reconfiguration of architectural theory, both within the realm of architectural praxis (as a tendency towards bottom-up pragmatics) and outside of it (as a theoretical academic discipline à part entière). Complexity and differentiation, the cornerstones of most of the current theory, have find their own operational way into the new vocabularies and strategies of architectural praxis, both in the States and on the Continent. Curiously enough, one has to admit that the pressure of the un-going media-digitalization has been a major accelerator of this process of normalization of critical theory within praxis, maybe because of their systematic similarities of paste-cut-copy. On the verge of going mainstream, the risk for critical theory is then to be commodified and instrumentalized within praxis as a mere formal technique, loosing thereby most of its critical potential.

It is with this broader mouvance of the architectural praxis-theory spectrum in mind, that I would like to problemetize today’s theme of density, whose tactical potentiality I would like to test in relation to the more strategic concept of intensity and intensification. I will begin by analyzing some problematic issues encountered around the theme of density in the discourse of the new generation of pragmatics and will continue on the theme of intensification which I will link with the theoretical framework of both Eisenman and Koolhaas.

Within the broader spectrum of current ‘maximalist’ pragmatisms—the ‘max’ qua form, function, material or technique/computation, as opposed to the ‘minimalists’—two younger tendencies have been particularly well mediatized: the mainly American computational diagrammatics (grouped around G. Lynn, A. Zaero-Polo, B. van Berkel, S. Kwinter, S. Allen, R. Somol, etc.) and the Dutch pragmatics of the ex- ’OMA Reference’ Generation (MVRDV, Big Soft Orange etc.).\(^1\) Both have a lot in common—a. o. ‘critical operationality’, multi-functionalist pragmatism, immanent self-generative processes, non-linear and non-dialectical approach, complexity and difference etc. However, they mainly differ in the way they effectuate their strategies, the former pursuing a maximizing of form (through computational diagram processes and deleuzian rhyzomatics), the latter a maximizing of matter (through a subversive détournement of extremized research via surrealist avant-garde techniques, and through the internalization of urban conditions). Underscoring the theoretical tension between both attitudes, we recognize some theoretical traces and formal imprints of Eisenman and Koolhaas respectively, both acting as a sort of ‘strange attractor’—t. i. at the same time claimed and rejected by their own environment.

The theme of \textit{density}—or better \textit{hyper-density}—has never been so well mediatized as in the recent publication of MVRDV: FARMAX. As leading protagonists of the new Dutch \textit{pragmatics}, MVRDV explore an experimental field hovering between \textit{maximalism} and \textit{diagrammatics}. I could summarize their main maximalist statement as follows.\(^2\)

Starting from a restrictive definition of \textit{density} as the “amount of available space per person,” the authors bluntly suggest to “carry the densities to an extreme” and to “pump up” the circumstances and constraints to such a maximization as to reach a point of \textit{hyper-density} and “massiveness”. At this point of extravaganza, architecture would bifurcate towards both interior and urbanism, and “gravities” and events would “emerge from within the tapestry of objects.” By adopting “extremizing as a technique of architecture” and by extrapolating the data of their research (“datascape”), the authors expect the society to question its own massive behavior of demands and norms. Artistic intuition would be replaced by research hypotheses enabling us to “observe, extrapolate, analyze and criticize our behavior” all together.

Taken mainly taken from their major text “Datascape,” these arguments reflect well the overall scope of MVRDV’s conceptual culture, which is one of systematically cultivating paradoxes, multiplicity, pluralism and difference to their extremes, but also one in which difference is systematically used as a formula, a parameter to apply on objectified data.

While hyper-density is initially meant as a critique of the chaos theory, it is funny to discover their hidden structural similarities since both are focusing on the point of disrupture and bifurcation of rational systematics toward unforeseen, chaotic behavior.

Besides this, a lot of other arguments remain questionable. Systematizing \textit{density} as a technique of ‘maximization of difference’, greatly jeopardizes and commodifies the differentiating aspect of \textit{difference} ‘in se’, understood in its spatio-temporal dimension of process of continual differentiation. The reification of difference as operational tool of \textit{techné}, also renders mute its transformational and critical dimension, one which could lead to a hopeful cathartic change of perception and behavior of the masses and create new meanings which would overcome the barriers of dialectical oppositions—to paraphrase their own argument. However, the systematization of difference and paradox as operational tools, can simply not resolve their inherent problematic dimension, which will remain entire. There is neither extravaganza nor redemptive nirvana beyond the point of “massiveness”.

On the other hand, the question can be raised whether the subversive dimension underlying the maximization of (sociological) ‘research’, is not undermining the ‘research’ strategy in the first place. There is a sort of ambivalence in undertaking a comprehensive research of objective data and parameters inflecting a project—in a sense a hyper-functional attitude—for the only sake of

objectifying and aesthetizising them in a way of pseudo-scientific mannerism. It is thus not
granted whether the end-result is really overcoming its hyper-functional underpinnings, whether
the maximization of functionalism (as hyper-functionalism and hyper-density) is really leading to a
disruptive criticality, as expected.

Lastly, I would like to refer to the broader heritage of the OMA generation and to what appears to
me as a sort of retro-active looping of OMA references. By zooming and enlarging a specific part
of the OMA culture—the lines which spin about Manhattanism, Congestion, Bigness and the
Generic—abstraction is made of the complexity of its original milieu, the in-tensive
undecidedness of the complex network of intertwined concepts. Of course, this semantic
abstraction is a typical OMA act, but, when magnified and re-injected within the breeding OMA
culture, it is as if, under the objectified field, reemerges the problematic dimension of these
“gravities”, which then become systemized and reified as individual wholes. It is interesting to
discover how FAR the MAX of the Metropolitan pace, which is the real motor of hyper-density,
has been internalized and digested by architecture, as to make it, as in a magician trick,
completely disappear and reappear as its Doppelgänger, the City. Großstadt in Excess!

Rather than conceiving density only from its dimension as tactic of compacting physical data, I
would rather approximate it as an internal strategy of intensification, t. i. as a ‘hyper-and-hypo in-
tensity’ (‘more’ and ‘less’; rather than ‘more is more’) of matter-form, which relies, for its
problematization, on notions such as immanence (or self-generation) and repetition of difference.
Following loosely Deleuze and De Landa’s description of intensification, I would like to
approximate it as the intensification of the strata of signifiance, that is as a field of matter-form
which varies in intensity all along the thicknesses of its stratifications. Through a continuous
process of in-formation of matter and materialization of form, a sort of self-sustained process of
intensification is put into motion, which is, as it were, growing from the inside. Considering the
differentiated play of resistance and attraction of form and matter, the parameters of intensity
differ all along the strata of the field of signifiance, producing a non-homogeneous and non-linear
field of intensities.

In the perspective of the problem of the theory-praxis relationship, it is possible to imagine this
process of continual intensification as an accelerator of the whole process of actualization of
diagnosis into praxis, and vice versa, so to create a continuous movement of differentiation in the
overall field of design.

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3 G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, B. Massumi, (Trans.), (Minneapolis, London:
University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 502-511 a. o. See also, M. De Landa, A Thousand
4 G. Deleuze, Foucault, Sean Hand (Trans.), (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota
It is in this context of the *theory-praxis* relationship, that I would like to test this notion of *intensification*; first and more extensively, in relation to the conceptual and formal framework of Eisenman, and then, as a way of final open reflection, in relation to some less exposed *intensive* aspects of Rem Koolhaas’ *pragmatics*.

Both Eisenman and Koolhaas, starting from opposite perspectives, have been thinking of conceptual strategies and formal tactics as processes of *objectivization* which could be transgressive of the normally *subjective* dimension of the design process. However, their way to overcome the “too much” of meaning, determinism, aesthetics, subjectivism etc. is paradoxically one of intensifying the complexity of its field of *significance*: in order to get rid of the linearity of the classical signification links (the classical signifier-signified relationship), both opt for an extreme *intensification* of *significance* of flows of matter-form.

If we look to the strategic dimension of both Eisenman’s and Koolhaas conceptual toolboxes, we discover a sense of *intensification* between *theory* and *praxis*, which, by the continuity of its movement of differentiation, strongly contrasts with the linearity of f. i. MVRDV’s *extrimizing* techniques or Van Berkel’s *operational diagrammatics*. There is a sort of *perpetuum mobile* of writing and re-writing, stratification and destratification, construction/deconstruction, in which the overall set of elements and tools, diagnoses and processes are constantly put into motion and reciprocal tension. Contrary to Van Berkel’s claim to avoid post-theory and pursuing an actual ‘real-time’ theorizing of praxis, there is here a simultaneous process of proto- and post theorization which puts the design process in a continual motion of *un-decidedness*. The act of deciding, t. i. the act of cutting the links, is repeated over and over as a movement of *repetition of difference*. The continual in-tensification of the flows of matter-form as differentiation, energies the whole process of actualization of *diagnosis* into *praxis*: there is a continuous reenactment, re-energizing of difference which spans the overall field of design. This is different from f. i. the unidimensional temporality of MVRDV’s “massiveness” whose transformative effect of *bifurcation* only occurs at the end-stage of a tedious *data-scape* research of maximization. Till then, the whole process of rationalization remains utterly unidimensional in its hyper-functionality. The same can be said of Van Berkel’s *operational diagrams*, or Gregg Lynn’s *computational diagrams* which are linearly limited and determined by their own machinic development.

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7 Cf. MVRDV, *ibid*. 
Now, a closer look to Eisenman’s conceptual framework, will probably offer us more clues about the possibility to approach the theme of density as intensification of matter-form, rather than as densification of mere matter. For Eisenman does not conceive matter in its pure physicality or objecthood, but as a relational process in which matter and form are paradoxically interacting on each other as in-formed matter or materialized form. In this paradoxical one-twoness, matter is thought off as the necessary resistant presence of the physical embodiment, and form as the absence within the presence which subverts and exceeds matter from within. Matter as objecthood refers to the necessary but not sufficient conditions of the functional, programmatic, structural, physical, semantic, cultural etc. embodiment of an architectural object, without which neither building nor architecture can be conceived. Form, conceived as differentiating interiority or being ‘in se’, is an energetic factor of pure relational acceleration, movement and transformation: a sort of strange attractor which subverts, transforms, dislocates matter as an outside inside. When confronting density as a process of compacting physical matter with Eisenman’s ambivalent qualification of matter as matter-form, we are somehow limited by the narrow scope of density’s linearity. Flows of matter-form cannot be compacted or decompacted as easy as physical data. Therefore one could state that the problem of density has bifurcated to another stage, which I described earlier as a process of intensification, that is a complex process in which the parameters of intensity are not linearly and not homogeneously distributed all along the strata of the process, and in which there is a continuous play of attraction/repulsion between the physical resistance and the formal energies which informs it from within.

Many aspects of Eisenman’s conceptual framework are motivated by this process of intensification. Let us take three examples, one relating to the architectural design techniques, one to the general theoretical discourse and one to some specific formal and conceptual tools.

1. Considering the overall design strategy at work in Eisenman’s office, one discovers a back and forth blurring of the involved design techniques: rather than converging into a single synergetic design process, the different techniques at work—the physical modeling, the three dimensional computational modeling, the diagrams and the text—are all confronted to each other in a discontinuous process of reciprocal resistance and stimulation. This makes that, at the final stage of the project, all four discourses, which continued their development at their own speed, are not exactly fitting to each other and delivering a not-homogeneous end product which cannot be reduced to one of the means of representation, say the final model, the diagrams or the text.

2. Within the general scope of Eisenman’s conceptual discourse—as formulated in a series of texts and essays written over a period of thirty years—this aspect of multi-textuality, of continuous

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re-writing and misreading, is even more clearly perceptible. If it is somehow possible to map Eisenman’s theoretical development according to some major theoretical references—Colin Rowe in the mid and late sixties, Noam Chomsky in the seventies, Foucault, Tafuri and Derrida in the eighties and Deleuze in the nineties—overtime it becomes more and more difficult to track back the specific inputs of the one or the other, since the later inputs could not really erase the previous ones. All of these theoretical references have, at one time or another, been critical in the development of Eisenman’s conceptual apparatus, as they helped to shape Eisenman’s critical perspective in reading and writing architecture—following, in terms of Zeitgeist, the paradigmatic shifts from Rowenian neo-kantiasm, via transformational structuralism to post-structuralism. However, when analyzing the major lines of thoughts—such as the question of autonomy, conceptuality, critical theory, immanence, subject-object relationships, representation and textuality, architectural form and so on—one discovers a curious contamination of perspectives which can only be explained by this continuous process of intensification and blurring of references—a process in which philosophers, architects, critics, artists, broad cultural phenomenons, architectural problems etc. are confronted with the resistance of the architectural discipline, whether in theory or in practice. In short, there is here at work a process of endogenous intensification, of mutual engrafting and cross-fertilization of concepts, elements and outside references which are all confronted to the resistance of architectural interiority and anteriority. However, outside references are never linearly instrumentalized in Eisenman’s intensification process, since, in their process of theoretical assimilation, they have to confront a field of multiple resistances and deviations.

Eisenman’s theme of the not-classical, for instance, was modulated as a result of intensification between Foucault’s differentiation of the classical and the modern episteme, Baudrillard’s theme of simulation, Derrida’s textuality and deconstruction and finally, the specific connotation of the classical and the modern in the field of architecture. Ten years later, this issue of the paradigmatic shift will be reinterpreted around the issue of the Digital vs. the Mechanical Paradigm, this in contrast with Benjamin’s statement in ‘The Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’.

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To take another example, the issue of *Conceptual Architecture*\(^{12}\), which came up in the seventies, was articulated around an interpretation of Rowe’s neo-kantian differentiation between the conceptual and the perceptual (i.e. between the literal and the phenomenal), which was confronted to the conceptual in the field of Conceptual and Language Art, to Chomsky’s semantic-syntactics differentiation, and finally to Eisenman’s own interpretation of Terragni’s multi-layering design techniques, as he described under the term of Cardboard Architecture.

To take a last example, the issue of *autonomy* started, in the seventies, from an analysis of the autonomous self-referential object in the Russian Avant-Garde, and continued in the early eighties as a reflection on the autonomy of the architectural discipline as institution (we recognize here the input of Italian negative thought and French structuralism); in the late eighties, under influence of Derridean post-structuralism the issue of autonomy becomes a problem of *insidedness* and *presentness*\(^{13}\), that is an *immanence*, as an ‘outside inside’; and in the Deleuzian nineties, it would be again modulated as a question of *interiority* vs. *exteriority*.\(^{14}\)

However, it is clear that at the end of this *intensification* process, Eisenman’s *interiority*, still pregnant with the resistant voices of earlier interpretations, does not really match the Deleuzian description.

Actually we can find in Eisenman’s architecture a nice formal parallel to this slow conceptual transformation. Whereas the early Houses of the late sixties-seventies, were conceived as Cardboard models put on top of the surface with no real anchorage in the ground (the object is cut off its context), we find at the end of the seventies and in the eighties a tendency to ground the project by means of excavation and grid superposition, while in the nineties it looks like the object is emerging from the materiality of the ground itself. It is as if the object has lost the strong physical linearity of its *objecthood*, to become a ‘*weak object*’\(^{15}\), impregnated by the flows of matter-form.

3. These examples bring me to my third point, in which I would like to say something on the intensive relationship between the conceptual tools and the specific formal tools at work in Eisenman’s design strategies. Already in the seventies, in his Early Houses, Eisenman used such

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\(^{14}\) Cf. footnote 9.

\(^{15}\) For P. Eisenman, architecture should be considered as a ‘*weak form*’ (t. i. an arbitrary, undecidable and excessive sign system), rather than as a strong form discipline (t. i. an architecture in which there is a one-to-one correlation between meaning, function, structure and form). P. Eisenman, "Strong Form, Weak Form", in *Architecture in Transition: Between Deconstruction and New Modernism*, (Munich: Prestel, Munich, 1991), pp. 33-45.
formal tools as the repetition of structural elements, as a means to blur the semantic relationship between the object and the perceiving subject. By doubling a wall structure with a second columnar grid system in House II\(^{16}\), Eisenman introduced a dimension of un-decidedness on the vertical datum: which of both elements, the wall or the column, was the real supporting element. In the span of his career a great list of other formal tools have been developed, such as superpositions, dislocations, decompositions, scalings, traces, rhetorical tropes and so on, which all intend to blur the whole palette of signifiance of matter-form relationships by introducing repetition of difference. Whereas, in the seventies these formal interrogations where more concerned with the problem of syntax, sign and representation, they gradually more involved questions of textuality, writing and spacing. These formal tools were not invented for the sake of mere aesthetics or pure pleasure of blurring: they conceptually tend to problemetize questions of interiority and anteriority of architecture. In fact, most of the formal strategies are triggered by a deeper interest for critical and theoretical issues: transcending the purely formal dimension of architecture, they attempt to tackle the problematic question of architecture as a critical theory and praxis at once. This implies that there is an intense and complex interaction between the conceptual tools of the architectural theory and the formal tools of the architectural praxis.

I would like to end my intervention, with a sort of retroactive loop which brings me back to the question of density and Dutch pragmatism. This is more than a boutade about the end as a new beginning, since I would like to suggest the possibility of another, slightly different reading of Koolhaas pragmatic ‘dirty realism’, a reading in which the strategic un-decidedness of his pragmatics, its rhetorical intensity, would be acknowledged.

In a recent article, Koolhaas has been analyzing the ‘new’ urban conditions encountered in the Pearl River Delta, which consisted in dry diagnosis of data, with no pretense to conclusive or ready-made recipes whatsoever.\(^{17}\) Highly significant of his presentation was the great contrast between the sheer informative character of his presented material and the intensive, excessive overuse of the copyright symbolization, which seemed to indicate a subversive tendency to transgress the dirty realist approach of his own new urban pragmatics. Koolhaas’ act of copywriting seemingly banal concepts (most of them economically oriented), historically loaded idioms (as ‘tabula rasa’, or the revisited ‘more is more’) or fresh neologisms, all together reformatted a configuration of concepts which are all abstracted from their common signifying context in order to be exposed to the shocks of semantic multiplication and blurring—a surrealist gesture which reenacts the paranoiac critical method of the metropolitan culture of congestion. Now, there is

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\(^{17}\) Cf. R. Koolhaas e.a., *Project on the City 1*, Harvard Design School, (Koln: Taschen GmbH, 2001), pp.704-709 (glossary).
something paradoxical in marking these items with a seal of semantic abstraction, while *making*
them *ready* for market and computational consumption by normalizing their copyright—a
problematic double meaning which is certainly meant by the author.

When considering Koolhaas’ earlier writings as ‘Delirious NY’ or of ‘S M L XL’ (especially the
dictionary), one recognizes in this copyright diagnosis a curious *intensification* of the urge of
‘naming’ and ‘renaming’ things, over and over again. The copyright list says not only a lot about
Koolhaas’ conceptual and formal toolbox—which tools to use when (this to the delight of all
pragmatics), it says also a lot about his sense of rhetoric, which clearly exceeds the level of pure
consumerism and neo-functional pragmatism of its apparent look. In a sense, this rejoins
Eisenman’s own preoccupations with rhetorical excess and over-signification as subversive of the
normative condition. However, both attitudes, far from being mere gratuitous gestures of rhetoric
persuasion, singularize themselves by their critical intention to internalize the problem of
*significance* from within architectural *Jetstzeit*.

Bernard Kormoss

Manhattanism – Density – Culture of Congestion

“Manhattanism is the one urbanistic ideology that has fed, from its conception, on the splendors and miseries of the metropolitan condition—hyper-density—without once losing faith in it as the basis for a desirable modern culture. Manhattan’s architecture is a paradigm for the exploitation of congestion. It reveals a number of strategies, theorems and breakthroughs that not only give logic and pattern to the city’s past performance, but whose continuing validity is itself an argument for a second coming of Manhattanism, this time as an explicit doctrine that can transcend the island of its origins to claim its place among contemporary urbanism. With Manhattan as example, this book is a blueprint for a Culture of Congestion.”


Copyright

Levine, that is, de-monstrates the grammatical writing appropriate to the age of mechanical reproduction in which “copyright” now means the right to copy anything, a mimicry or repetition which is originary, producing differences (just as in allegory anything may mean anything else).

Density

The impression of declining densities would be incomplete, even misleading, if the special impact of multifamily dwellings upon the figures were not recognised. Density per acre of ground assumes a quite different significance when we begin to pile dwelling units on top of one another and give up the amenity of the individual yard.


ARCHITECTURE © Stocks, commodity, profit, status; otherwise only marginally related to the art and science of building. ARCHITECTURE © is designed in the Pearl River Delta under unprecedented pressures of time, speed, and quantity.

AMBIGUITY © Policy of indeterminacy, or half-hearted embrace, to exploit possibilities for political or economic gain. AMBIGUITY © allows tensions and contradictions to coexist in matters of state sovereignty and territory. AMBIGUITY © used by the Chinese Communist Party in one circumstance becomes leverage in another.

DIALECTICS © A classic method of argument that weights contradictory facts or ideas with a view to the resolution of their real, or apparent, contradictions. In the Pearl River Delta, the concept has acquired enough fuzzy logic to be used to justify and contradiction—political policy or otherwise.

MERGE © In the Pearl River Delta, DIALECTICS© collapse into MERGE© (the first a method to understand and synthesize oppositions, the second a brutal collapsing of opposites to create new conditions: Landscape + city = SCAPE©, business _ pleasure + BUSINESS VACATION© socialism + the MARKET©—the socialist market economy…

MORE IS MORE © The conclusion of an evolution that began with Mies as "less is more" and passé through Ventury as "less is a bore," now ends in a paroxysm of the quantitative in the PRD as MORE IS MORE ©. Five hundred square kilometres of urban substance is built every year, of which 6.4 million square meters is found in Shenzhen alone. In addition to quantity, redundancy proliferates: five international airports exist, with two more nearing competition; in one building alone, twelve different curtain wall systems are used (see CURTAIN WAR©), while five lighting systems are deployed in a single 15-square-meter room; ten revolving restaurants are constructed with four square blocks; 414 holes of golf are open for play, and 720 more are under construction.

PHOTOSHOP© The same power offered by Photohop, to combine everything into anything—the uncritical accumulation of desire—is exercised literally in the Pearl River Delta, PHOTOSHOP© is the freedom to manipulate not image but urban substance, regulated only by the rules of FENG SHUI©.
