

Squares

Form and reduction of arbitrariness

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Abstract. The short abstract text should be a few paragraphs long, and not longer than 10-11 lines (07_abstract).

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This morning, I was confronted to myself in the bathroom's mirror. My own teethbrushing self in this regular sized glass square led me to an uncomfortable constatation. For some strange reason, various recent projects at the office share a common feature. Their plans almost always have a square outline. Why would this be ? In some way, it has always been a positively conscious and project-bound decision. But at the same time, this recurrent figure must mean something. Hopefully, something more than some psychorigid obsession, and something else than an « encounter-of-the-third-kind » phenomenon.

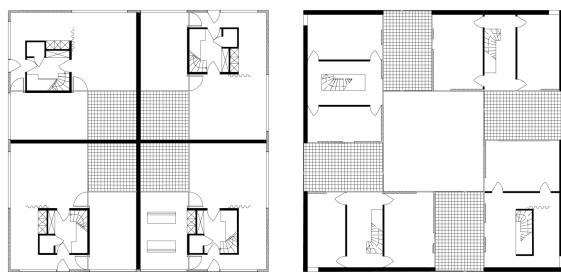


Figure 1
Genk social housing competition project, AgwA 2007

Formal reduction

The square is some absolute absence of form. More than a form, it is a simple, logical rule : four equal sides and angles. As a result, the square is a filling item, inducing isotropy, supporting all other qualities, but not imposing any. It is the Tile, or the Pixel. It is an enabling principle. The square is a fundamental artificial shape. It is constructed through reason and logic, and by this alone. No subjective emotions, no aesthetic considerations, and no recurrence in the natural world.

The square is a victory of reason upon the world, and its irregular profusion of forms. Think of Kheops : God's representative, ruling upon the nature – the universe. The permanent tension of thought is needed to achieve the square in spite of the world and its curves, shapes, holes, irregularities, explosions, dunes, rocks and dust.

Through this formal question of the square, a struggle is engaged between rationality and contingency, necessity and arbitrariness.

Arbitrariness and formalism

Arbitrariness seems to have become a general condition in the contemporary society. As architects, how can we react to the multiplication of styles, approaches, and formalisms ? Cultural identities have vanished in a thinned “globalized culture” or got sprawled in aggressive ultralocal regionalisms. There is a process ongoing of expanding of the possibilities, and at the same time, of vanishing of their consistencies. “The seeming failure of the urban offers an exceptional opportunity, a pretext for Nietzschean frivolity (...) The certainty of failure has to be our laughing gas/oxygen”¹ Indeed, after decades of this Koolhaasian subversion, what makes today a high-tech bling-bling approach more or less valuable than a socio-participationist one?

We are trapped by this situation. On the one hand, we can choose some style, adhere to it, adapt it, repeat it. But what is the relevance of applying a recipe ? On the other hand, we can search for another, unexisting style or approach. But then, it will only become another possibility, an insignificant increment of the big global catalogue.

One way out : not to choose, nor to invent formal approaches. In order to escape, or to transcend the arbitrariness of form, we need to reduce formal choices to their minimum. If possible, avoid form. Out of the formal chaos of the world, we need to (re-)open a space for pragmatism and necessity.

Shapelessness

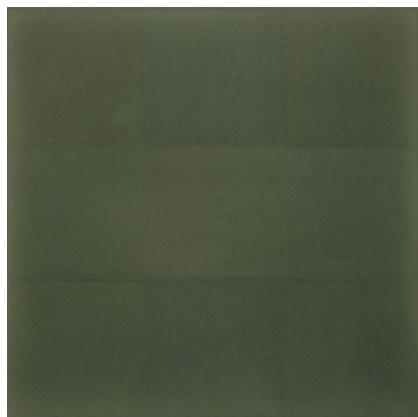


Figure 2

Ad REINHARDT Painting 1954-1958

source : <http://nga.gov.au/International/Catalogue/Detail.cfm?IRN=43904>

Scientists use to isolate phenomena from disturbing influences in so-called “closed systems” in order to discover the object's own properties and mechanisms. Ad Reinhardt is an artist who refuses to be accountable to the world. As he says, “the one thing to say about art and life is that art is art and life is life, that art is not life and life is not art”² He seeks a total segregation between art and the world. Consider it a case of extreme consciousness.

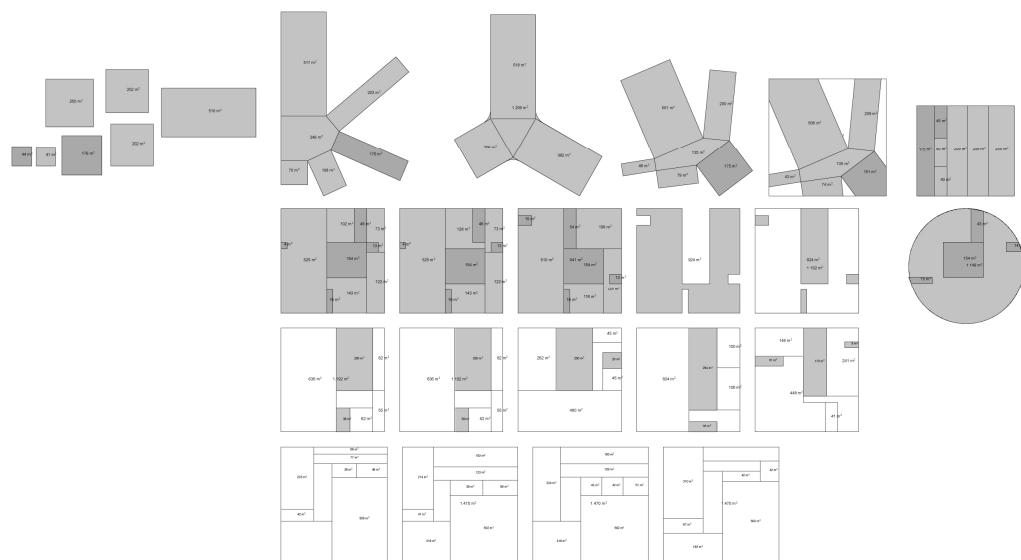
Through successive reductions in his « black paintings », Ad Reinhardt was searching for a final, transcendental, ultimate painting which he then only could reproduce – again and again. He ultimately became a painting Sisyphus, producing middle-sized square black trisection paintings. The systematically unchanging title is mainly written in a negative way. The paintings are meant to be shapeless, sizeless, directionless, colourless, relationless, etc.³

In his paintings, the use of the square means the avoidance of any formal interferences. In fact, his painting became void of everything but itself. Reinhardt

achieves a total segregation of art, life and the arbitrariness of the artist and the world he is part of. Art – in his case, painting- is tending to its own essence. Art, freed from all external arbitrary input, is reduced to nothingness, excepted the conscience of itself.

We, instead, in our projects, are searching for a bicephal hybrid. On one side, we are seeking for « architecture » on this universal or immanent level, yes, but also for its concrete embodiment and accountability to the world through one program, one client, one site, and one concretion. Simultaneously absolute and contingent. This is our salvation and our damnation : permanently new undiscovered fields to explore, and also the impossibility to reach the horizon. The certainty of failure is a fact, but does it impose laughing gas as a resignative drug ? Does fulfillment reside in the success of our doing or in the very struggle between consciousness and the real world ?

PHIL, a study case



*Figure 3
Phil, plan researches, AgwA 2008*

PHIL will become the beating heart of a rural school campus. Placed in a central position, it addresses the entire site. Programmatic stuff -contingency- has to be organized -ordered- into a building, anchored in reality. We want it to be porous, equally open and oriented to all other places in the campus.

First stage : the temptation of the laughing gas. The program is assembled in various starlike shapes and tridents. Form is organizing space through a process of vivisection of the program. No contact, no problem. But this is always unfair. How do you orient such spaces ? What happens with the spaces inbetween ? In this process, there will always be privileged and penalized ones. So the starlike experiments got compacter, and finally fit in a square. Then the stars and forms dissolved completely in a simple stroked square.

Stage two : the temptation of binar thinking. Form is evacuated. Now we have to find other impulses to organize the plan. This happened through a kahnian binar differentiation of the program. Servant spaces define the served ones in an increasingly strict way. But now, the program gets petrified : servant spaces lose their full potential. Also, in a way, the served spaces seem to be disabled, as they need the support of other spaces to exist. Twice unfair, this way of doing looked like a dead end. Then, the circle,

as a resurgence of form ? Perhaps not, but still, the circle makes it impossible to organize the plan in a unambiguous, equivalent, balanced way.

Stage three : towards unicity and programmatic potential. Progressively, as the binar differentiation is pushed aside, all spaces acquire the same level of quality. Progressively, all redundancy is also removed. Mathematicians define a figure as perfect if it is composed entirely of squares of different sides⁴. Is it a coincidence ? Here also, we considered the plan perfect only when each space was self-sufficient, necessary and unique. Significantly, colors disappeared from the sketches together with the programmatic differentiation.

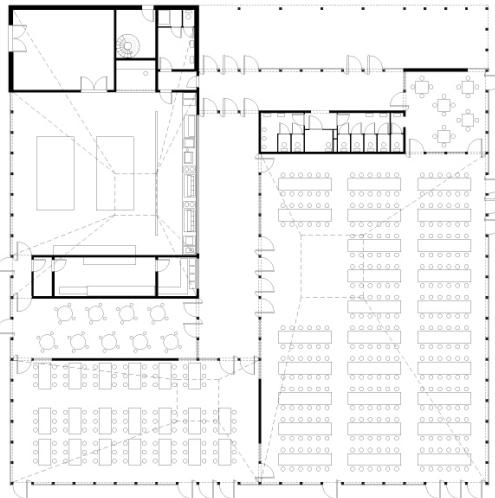


Figure 3
Phil, plan, AgwA 2008

Vitruvius reloaded ?

The « squaring » of PHIL and its consequences, extracted the arbitrariness of the form (venustas) from the making of the project. If the question of arbitrariness led us to avoid form, is there also arbitrariness ongoing at the levels of programmation (commoditas) and at the material level (firmitas) ? If we look further on, does PHIL imply a kind of Vitruvian nihilism ? Or on the contrary, does it lead to a new balance, a renewed complementary of the trilogy ?

Indeed, in the words of Bernard Huet : « I think we could almost resume architecture thinking since Alberti around [the three Vitruvian categories] »⁵. But in the XXth century, the wholeness of the trilogy was progressively deconstructed. Architects began to address the terms of the trilogy separately. This induces that the addressing of one category has become an arbitrary choice now.

Phil reacted by reducing form. Could a similar attitude be adopted with the remaining two categories ? What will happen then ?

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