NOT EVERYTHING, NOT ALL AT ONCE (title suggestion)

Praxis 14 was meant to be a special issue on two accounts: my guest editing, which is new for Praxis, normally propelled by the volunteer work energy of project editors (which we missed dearly in the process), and on the account of our plan, at least, to get it out faster than usual, cheaper than usual, and one of my proposals as the guest editor: less mediated than usual (though not any less curated for that). This last was in part because I thought that a more raw issue would indeed be special for Praxis, but also because the performative aspect of storytelling in my mind had to be preserved as such.

My current interest in narrative grew out of interpreting the contemporary patterns of both research and of the burgeoning desires for narrative amongst my students.

On the research side, there have been a number of recent reinterpretations of postmodernism by historians. Then there has been a renewed operative interest in Postmodernism’s products perfectly exemplified by Charles Jencks and Sam Jacob’s Radical Postmodernism issue of AD, which I see as a sign of the renewed interest in signification and meaning more specifically, but also as an embrace of the sheer joy in sourcing postmodernism. And then there is the position presented nearly 20 years ago by Mark Wigley in issue 27 of Assemblage…STORYTIME…that is hard for a pedagogue of architecture to disagree with: “real craftsmanship in architecture is the crafting of a good story, which depends on a prior story about the way a certain kind of craftsmanship, a certain way of assembling building materials, talks.”

For me all of these beats in the field represent a collection of symptoms of, or, reactions to specific disciplinary and cultural developments. And to get at those I want to invite you to look at an image that you have no doubt seen before.

Charles Jencks’s 1971 evolutionary tree – a hybrid of futurological prediction and trend assessment - is one of those sexy images that circulates through architectural discourse via books, lectures, blogs, and is currently available on flickr.[[1]](#endnote-1) It is a cognitive map, as Fredrik Jameson might have wished for, just not for postmodern life in general, but for navigating the contemporary architectural plurality.

It still “sort of” works, as well as it ever did, its hilarious authority bestowed upon it via its graphic connotations. X axis presenting history, Y, a stylistic pulse that Jencks identified in the work, all rendered in the ultimate architectural history flowchart. It moves from big words on the left – Logical, Idealist, Self-Conscious, Intuitive, Activist, and Unselfconscious – to ever-smaller ones (including some individual architects’ names) on the right.

If you look closely at the retouched version (2000) you will find Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin in the category called Unselfconscious, a category that Jencks will explain, comprises 80% of the environment. You will find Eisenman in a special bubble within the Logical band, together with Foster and Rogers (high-tech and cardboard architecture made perversely intimate with one another) in the seventies, and then Eisenman again at a strange junction of Intuitive and Activist in the late 80s. Around the same time and hanging to the side of activism: Koolhaas (qualified by “generic architecture”), Scogin, and Hadid occupy a common blotch.

Eisenman’s work did indeed change over time, and he has been the first one to try to explain its evolving meaning, so the fact that he occupies different spots in Jencks’s flowchart is not totally random, but it is hard to escape the feeling that the closer one looks at the chart, the further any sense of historical certainty recedes. But what the “Evolutionary Tree” does accomplish, in direct opposition to its promise of rendering speciation visible, is an ultimate evacuation of meaning from the big words on the left.

Words pile, patches of black unite them, patches of white separate them and together they spatialize time.[[2]](#endnote-2) This intriguing drawing has to be seen as a symptom of postmodernism rather than as a tool for surviving it. Its contemporary appeal mirrors a collective nostalgia for a cognitive map, while it in fact actively performs (in its own way) the destabilizing destruction of meta-narratives, not in a spectacular way, just simply by relying on the flow chart scientificity rather than on any type of verifiable (and often not even conventional) history of 20th centry architectural production. So then why start here?

Because indeed the hope that one could map the field for the purposes of navigating it (or teaching it), as well as the dizzying swirl of words in Jencks’s attempt to do so, both equally haunt the bubble of US contemporary academic architectural discourse.. It is hardly Jencks’s fault, but his image did capture, indeed it predicted, the plurality of concerns that corresponds to our own(it is only fair to credit him with this). Working on a million different platforms simultaneously is commensurate with the complexity of issues that define our time. But of course, things would be simpler, at least in architecture schools, if someone would finally enumerate, or resuscitate one or two ideas about our disciplinary core (preferably ontological, but something like a conventional core would do as well, as long as it did not sound too much like NAAB – I am being Ironic here).

The loss of certainty is not something to mourn (we are repeatedly told), and yet that momentous time when early postmodern theory was a blood bath of meta narratives seems sufficiently distant to allow nostalgia for “grand narratives” and even harbor a suspicion about their ultimate disappearance. After all, we realize on daily basis that gender, race, class, and religion shape the world we live in even if the discourse about them may seem more tentative and pedestrian than at an earlier point in time.

Once nostalgia is on the table, Jencks’ flowchart gets reanimated not only as the mirror image of that contemporary want for clarity that was never experienced by those who mourn it (nor perhaps by those who appear to have had it), but indeed, as an allegory of dismantlement, and by the same token of the persistence of narratives, even if atomized, redistributed, repressed and retooled.

In a more recent, and by many accounts more deadly blow to modernism than Jencks’s, Bruno Latour told us that “certainty” was always a contrivance of sorts.[[3]](#endnote-3) After critiquing modernism’s legacy of reductive categorization, rigid binary oppositions, misguided supremacy of the rational, egotistical supremacy of man (over nature), he concluded that the world was never modern even as the moderns represented and intervened in it as if it had been. Now as much as one might agree with Latour (and I do) on a number of points of his critique, here and elsewhere, the final twist of his argument knocks the wind out of modernism indeed, but with it, as inevitable collateral damage, also goes the necessary pairing of representing of and intervening in the world. This pairing happens to be constitutive of all creative work, as some version of representing secures the authority (and grounds the hope) with which one intervenes in the world. The idea that modernist scientists, politicians, and architects imagined that some of their intellectual (and aesthetic) prejudices had the status of ontological truths is separable from the fact that the world has to be conceptualized and narrated – simply or complexly – in order for actions in it to have meaning. This is to say that the particular content, or values, of the moderns can be critiqued against our own contemporary concerns, but even if we accept that we are now far more conscious of entanglements and complexity of relationships between humans and non-humans, things and systems, actions and abstractions then our modern predecessors, without some form of imposed hierarchy onto that complexity, a cognitive map of sorts, *or at least a story*, no form of intentionality registers.

At a time when the archives are vast and ever expanding, and by this I mean both our general access to information and our disciplinary archives (scholarly, blogged and leaked) histories are made and remade instantly too, as plausible cuts through those archives. Storytelling then has to be seen as having particularly important navigational and propositional capacities. It might not require a full-fledged position, but it requires a point of view and that, even when it remains deeply personal, comes closer to a position than “liking,” “pinning” or “tumbling.” (this may be my own nostalgia speaking…but it is I think aligned with the nostalgic request for articulating arguments)

The ambition of this PRAXIS is far narrower than the general predicament I suggested above. Instead of revisiting postmodernism and thinking about how to reconstitute, if not meta- then medium level, legitimating narratives that operate on the level of practice (such as activism, optimization, new beginnings) we decided to collect stories that propose alternative endings. We collected architectural stories that more and less comfortably meld fictional, projective and critical elements, with the hope that their synthetic storytelling is key for propelling us beyond the impasses of excessive information, fast recycling, and propositional emptiness. In each of these pieces different lines of criticality and projection coexist. Importantly, storytelling here allows, and demands style, it is harder to farm out to a renderer…it offers resistance, although at times it might obscure things too, even dangerously. But that is the point of storytelling. Not everything, not all at once. Even if one cared about many things simultaneously, and it is hard not to do that today, composing a story imposes order and judgment on all the pieces that went into it in the first place.

The Praxis 14 stories are truly that…true stories. Parts of them are based on real facts and projects, and their effects may be very real as well, though they hardly hold the status of facts. Although some contain research, the findings are not presented to you didactically.

The most important takeaway from *True Stories*, is that telling a story requires commitment. And stories that were meant to be told, that were constructed to be told, like the ones collected in this issue of Praxis for a moment highlight narration itself as a project. And finally the ambiguity of the stories we collected (both gloomy and easy, free and constrained(?), pleasurable and damning) speaks not only to the impossibility to resolve critique and projection neatly but of a particularly contemporary willingness and comfort with their dialectical contradiction and coexistence. However retooled, post-produced, and mashed-up contemporary architectural narratives might be, it is in them that fragments of utopia still live, as points of view and as style…so yes “liking them” and “pinning them” even though I was a bit dismissive of these acts, may be the first step towards consolidating new arguments. If a story can have a fan at least it can have a following and provoke further stories into existence.

1. Credit the map and the flick site. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. We have never been modern [↑](#endnote-ref-3)