

Elegant Strategies for Agonistic Architectural Argumentation

by cristina goberna and urtzi grau
Fake Industries Architectural Agonism

Everyone claims to practice Architectural Discussions these days. Yet, how often do our conversations end up being monologues, consensual talks, neutral chats, or banal agreements? Could we introduce Agonism into an architectural conversation? Could we deliberately inject a friction into our discussions that might serve to advance the field? Could we do it without falling into the rhetorical cliché of the direct attack? Use the following strategies correctly and you will be able to express disappointment, disagreement, and even disapproval with such subtlety and taste that no one will dare to engage in a superficial architectural discussion with you ever again.

Number 1

opponent: We just got some pretty good news.
you: I can't believe it! Your client finally paid you the five hundred thousand dollars they owe you, didn't they?
opponent: Er...no.
you: Oh. Sorry. So what is the good news?
opponent: We are designing the re-tiling pattern for a bathroom in a brownstone in downtown Brooklyn.
you: Oh! That is certainly good, too!

strategy used:
Intentional Overstatement
of Expectations

Number 2

opponent: We just got some pretty good news.
you: Do tell!
opponent: We have been invited to curate, design, produce, fundraise, and install an architectural exhibit.
you: Wow! Is it an exhibition of your work?
opponent: No.
you: Is there an honorarium involved?
opponent: It is a pro bono project.
you: Well, it is remarkable that you are making such a big investment of time, money, and talent to exhibit the work of others. It also shows a great deal of generosity on your part to work that hard for an institution that will not pay you. If you can convince them to credit you for it, your exhibit might earn you a bit of prestige and maybe in the future they will take your work into account somehow.

strategy used:
Seed of Doubt

Number 3

strategy used:
Barrage of Interruptions

opponent: We have some pretty good news.

you: Go on!

opponent: We have just submitted a competition.

you: A competition? Great! Tell me: is it an open contest? Who is the jury? Will you build your design if you win? Was the submission a crazy amount of work?

opponent: The competition is open, the jury is unknown—

you: (to waiter) Excuse me! Are the scallops on the menu actual “diver” scallops or is that a misprint?

waiter: I’ll check with the kitchen.

you: (to opponent) Sometimes they fib. Anyway, tell me more about the competition.

opponent: I was saying that it is actually an open competition, the jury is unknown, and there is just one symbolic cash prize.

you: Waiter! Forget about the scallops.

waiter: As you wish, sir.

you: Sorry, please continue.

opponent: As I was saying, it was quite a lot of work to come up with the proposal indeed. I left my job for a week and the printing alone cost \$500...

you: I don’t know...do you think that “diver scallops” mean that they were caught by actual scuba divers? Or is it just some old fashioned way of saying “diverse”? I have always wondered about that.

Number 5

opponent: We just got some pretty good news.
you: Lay it on me already!
opponent: We have been invited to give a lecture.
you: That is really great news! I knew it, finally after all your efforts you are in an Ivy League school's lecture series!
opponent: Not quite: we will be talking at a Pecha-Kucha in Greenpoint next summer.
you: For God's sake! (whispering) Don't look, act normally.
opponent: What?
you: Slavoj Žižek just entered the restaurant and he's sitting at the bar with Tao Lin. I can't believe it!
opponent: Who? Where?
you: And they are carrying a bag full of American Apparel clothes! Do you have a camera? My iPhone's battery just died.
opponent: Sure, here you are. I can't see them. Why is it striking anyway?
you: Wait a second; I need to tweet this moment. I will tell you the story if you stop turning your neck as if you were the girl from The Exorcist.

strategy used:
Unfulfilled Intimations
of Actual Gossip

Number 6

opponent: We just got some pretty good news.
you: Don't leave me hanging here!
opponent: We are hiring fifteen interns in our office.
you: That is fantastic news! Tell me everything!
waiter: Well, we are submitting a big competition in six month or so...
you: Oh. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!
opponent: What?
you: What you said was: "hiring fifteen interns." What I heard was: "hiring fifteen unpaid interns." What a relief to be wrong.
opponent: Well...
you: For a moment I thought that you were going to exploit fifteen people. Can you imagine? You! Sympathetic with Occupy Wall Street! You! Sponsor of Amnesty International! You of all people! Ha ha ha ha ha!
opponent: Well, they are learning, we are going to tutor them...
you: Waiter! The check please!

strategy used:
Intentional Mishearing

Number 7

opponent: We just got some pretty good news.
 you: Tell me everything! Every detail of it!
 opponent: Our work is getting published.
 you: Don't say anything else. I knew it! Finally Princeton Architectural Press is publishing a monograph of your work! Is Beatriz Colomina writing the introduction? Jean-Louis Cohen maybe? Or is it Bedford Press? Actar?
 opponent: Not exactly.
 you: What do you mean?
 opponent: We have been invited to write an article in a great student-run journal.
 you: Definitely the kids are coming up from behind—(singing)—"I'm losing my edge!... I'm losing my edge!...to the art-school Brooklynites...in little jackets... and borrowed nostalgia for the unremembered eighties..."
 opponent: What do you mean? Are you really singing?
 you: "—But I was there!...Yeah! I was there!"
 opponent: Why are you singing that song?
 you: I'm sorry. I was just listening to an lcd Soundsystem bootleg from Terminal 5 in New York on the way over. Such a killer song. Such a killer band. Such a loss...

strategy used:
 Appreciation for the Arts

Number 8

opponent: I just got some pretty good news.
 you: I am listening to you.
 opponent: I got hired by a famous New York architecture office.
 you: I'm really happy for you! How did it happen?
 waiter: It is the office of one of my former professors; she invited me to collaborate.
 you: Very good! When are you starting?
 opponent: Tomorrow.
 you: Tomorrow? I thought you had planned to spend this weekend upstate with a date.
 opponent: I'm afraid I won't be able to go. I'm staying in the city for at least the next twelve weekends or so; such a shame that they don't pay for overtime.
 you: Overtime?!...I wonder if a physician does more overtime in a hospital than an architect in an office. Or how the average working hours in a Chinese and a New York architecture office compare? Even if your new job requires you to work eighty hours a week, that is probably nothing in comparison to working in China, although you probably aren't getting any health insurance or a working visa out of it...

strategy used:
 Detail-Oriented Side-Tracking

Number 9

values in ways I can't even begin to describe to other people. Sorry, I am leaving now. (opponent exits).

opponent: We just got some pretty good news.
you: Bring it on!
opponent: We have just moved to our new office space.
you: That is great news, where is it located?
opponent: It is in Chinatown, 149 Pell Street. It is in the basement, specifically the first table on your right when you enter the space.
you: And your three partners?
opponent: We share the table in groups of two. We are working in shifts of four hours per day each.
It has been working pretty well so far.
you: We are trying new models of ad hoc office practice ourselves, where we have almost no infrastructure and only get temporary associates for specific projects...
opponent: o.k., I'm done. I don't know why I even bother trying to have a meaningful conversation with you over dinner. I mean, yes, we were friends in college, but all you ever do is try to make me feel bad about my architectural

.....

note

The world is full of architectural narratives, more or less interesting; we do not want to add any more. The article that you, dear reader, have just read, is a détournement of the piece "How to Win a Conversation," a text by Paul Simms published in the "Shouts & Murmurs" section of The New Yorker on September 3rd, 2012. We thank Mr. Simms and his editors for having produced such a valuable source of copy and inspiration.

"Take Mies' minimalism: Less is More; take Venturi and
Scott-Brown's populism: Less is a Bore; take Philip Johnson's
opportunism: I am a Whore; take Bjarke Ingels' optimism:
Yes is More; add some left over cynicism from Rem and you
get Fake Industries Architecture Agonism: yes is no."
— eva franch i gilabert