



*Kengo Kuma | M2 Building*

# P E N D U L U M

## Design Against Time

*Ben Decuyper*

The phrase “grandfather clock effect” is most often used in regard to politics. It is a phrase used to address our country’s inability to stick to a particular course. It’s a phrase used to quickly note our country’s willingness to test different approaches to how our country should be led or maybe to note our country’s refusal to be content. It could even be thought of as the product of viewing our country as separate presidencies, party majorities, or other forms of striation brought about by rhythmic tides or elections. We can apply the same concept to the history of architectural design at least in recent decades. We oscillate between extremes. We see this with modernism and then very directly with the movement that followed, characteristically termed postmodernism.

It’s maybe a bit idealistic or unambitious of me to say that what we have currently in the design community is a good thing, but I do feel that way. We have a good thing going in that many designers are concerned with the computer’s application within architectural practice, all the while not feeling beholden to a dominant architectural style. Instead designers are far more diverse in what they are choosing to explore due to the shock caused by the implementation of the computer in architecture.

Does the digital age cause an acceleration and dilution of “ism”? The recent influx and spread of information and publication could be causing accelerated and varied modes of thought. A potential downside, however, may be that the resultant modes of thinking do not develop or compete in competitive markets or academic circles. This concept was a topic of interest during a debate between Patrik Schumacher and Mark Foster Gage at Texas A+M in 2017. Schumacher’s

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statements were somewhat ironically attributed to the situation that his very own Parametricism would require more than a mere couple of decades to mature since the computer is such a recent advent. He then claimed that flourishing philosophies such as Object Oriented Ontology are only fads in architecture today. Gage found Schumacher’s authorship of Parametricism which entails such recent/young activities to be a revisionist history that the collective culture couldn’t have by now defined organically.

Mark Foster Gage’s approach here is far more democratic than Patrik Schumacher’s pendulum-esque attitude. That being said, there are pros and cons to pendulum discourse. The pros are that it causes us to investigate different hypotheses and venture to different extremities in a manner that allows them to develop over sizable increments of time. However, the con is that in doing so we only deal with extremes or antipodes. We will constantly be changing the field or circumnavigating its boundaries if we view the history of the profession in this way. This is largely what causes confusion for the profession. In this state, architecture isn’t nearly as palatable as it could be considering it is a part of everyone’s life. This trend of oscillating between extremes causes frustration and we see this in how

people have come to regard politics as a largely frustrating enterprise in recent decades.

How do we combat our trend of thinking in a pendulum driven manner? Or how has the internet potentially rendered the pendulum way of thinking obsolete? Brainstorming what has caused the recent oscillations to occur will help.

Some believe the end of the Modernist movement occurred on March 16, 1972 when Pruitt Igoe's failures culminated in a cadaverous heap of rubble, twisted rebar, and lost faith in architecture's capabilities. A hopeful housing project turned war zone became dust and debris, and the pendulum of architecture frozen at arc's end fell, slowly swinging once again. The modernist movement had its extremes. We see this with the modernists' approach to urbanism. We see this in the war against ornament. Keep in mind there were good intentions, however, many of the results were stark buildings or neighborhoods comprised of rigid high-rises.

What spawned the postmodern movement? I am of the likely fashionable or over dramatic opinion that it was a reaction to living in a world with the bomb. The cold war, the most ephemeral war, was carrying on and had no end in sight. A decade into this strange period, functionalism wasn't enough, wasn't necessary, wasn't adequate in addressing the culture. The result was to dip into the well of tropes from the architecture of antiquity in a very nostalgic way, and to sometimes mask it with humor, or create chaotic buildings in a time when so little was familiar.

What caused the shift from the postmodern movement to the current design mentality? Maybe 9/11. War was tangible warfare again. The jokes were over and there was a renewed desire for streamlined, no-nonsense architecture. Maybe it was the 2008 recession. There was no more need

to instigate confusion with barely discernible writings by architects who kept their thesaurus nearby. Writings which aimed to justify buildings of spectacle with their cartoonish, enlarged Greek columns or aggressively fragmented facades. The architectural profession was hit hardest in terms of unemployment maybe because many popular architects had succeeded during the postmodern period in confusing the public as to what architecture is. As a result, starchitects today fuel their legacies with over simplified diagrams turned buildings.

Next time there is a monumental cultural happening, maybe a war, a disaster, or some massive technological advancement, designers could shift again, venturing into a territory synonymous with the postmodern movement in the way it was harmful to the profession and how people view architecture. The industrial age changed our design landscape with an almost homogenous spread of Modernism. We are now in the digital age, so it is reasonable to assume that a shift is happening again.

At this stage of the essay, we must forgo platitudes and generalizations. If we consider the past without cleanly defined edges or a history striated by conventional easy to remember names, we will of course see it as having been far more differentiated and diverse at the time. Within what we have identified as large collective schools of thought there were many subcategories, dissenters, and rogue individuals. The internet doesn't allow for striated documentation, segmentation, creation of chapters to occur retroactively in such a capital t true manner. Development of ideas has always been in a Deleuzian sense, rhizomatic and smooth, constantly ebbing and flowing. What is different today, however, is the presence of the internet which captures constant flux and documents it while it is happening. Everyone is an author, and everyone is a member of the audience and we are more conscious of this than ever. We are tapped into and entangled within the discourse. All the while, we truly cannot fathom what it means to have the internet at our disposal as it is far too young. There's little evidence yet of what it means on a social level, developmental level or political level. Some signs, however, are beginning to poke through. For example, social media is nearly a decade old and has already potentially challenged the framework of democracy as seen in the 2016 United States presidential election as well as the 2016 Brexit referendum. Of course, the presence of unvetted information is now a part of the authorship resulting in fewer truly educated citizens/voters.

It is going to take more than a single generation to truly develop a sound understanding of the internet's relationship with architecture. We need to attempt to convince our future designers that within the creation of new modes of thinking occurring in tandem with the current uncharted territory, not to subordinate measurable goals and current practices such as sustainable conduct.

This writing is the product of my reaction to the subject of the journal, Design Against. This idea that students are dedicating an entire student journal to "design against" may be equated to the grandfather clock still at work. While students are constantly feeling the need to "design against" things that are currently happening or things the

previous generation chose to explore, it must be thought of as a part of the discourse instead of solely reactionary or appealing to difference for the sole sake of difference. While students are preparing for their participation in this current shifting tide brought about by the digital age, students must do so in a democratic fashion and I hope students treat the continuation of architecture as one of constant change instead of stratum or pendulum oscillations.

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