

A View of the City

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In the first English edition of Le Corbusier's seminal book of essays, *Towards A New Architecture* (1927), one finds the following aphoristic assertions:

Profile and contour are the touchstone of the Architect.

Here he reveals himself as artist or mere engineer.

Profile and contour are free of all constraint.

There is no longer any question of custom, nor of tradition, nor of construction, nor of adaptation to utilitarian needs.

Profile and contour are a pure creation of the mind; they call for the plastic artist.

At this early moment of the Modern, such a call for sheer invention may be read as expressing an urge to displace architecture to a new, higher level of pure plasticity. The

sequence of thought set forth by Le Corbusier heavily weights denial against the counter-posed call for 'a pure creation of the mind.' The architect is admonished no longer to perform the role of 'mere engineer,' and to dispense with 'custom... tradition... construction... [and] utilitarian needs' in order to properly fulfill a mandate of creation that would exist 'free of all constraint.' Such an ambition for architecture would receive its defining inspiration through an awareness of social sensitivity mingled with the realization that technologically-aided capacity has forever transformed the metier of building.

For Margaret Priest's installation entitled *A View of the City*, this final point concerning technology's shaping of society is important for an overall reading of the work. Initially, however, one might encounter the piece along the founding predicates of 'profile and contour' – twin coordinates around which Le Corbusier has the architectural mind configure its ambition.

A View of the City iconically considers the form of the X which appears in three distinct manifestations. One element is present on the wall as a painting; one element is set onto the floor as cubic sculpture; and the third component is an upright, free standing form

that mediates between these two realms. These three incarnations of the X combine with each other so as to refer to architecture – to a concept of architecture that is both theory and practice, plan and section.

Allegorically the piece considers what crucially defines the limits of architecture. Set within a gallery space – comprised of exhibition walls, the space they enclose with floor and ceiling – *A View of the City* determines a viewing consciousness that is directed both to itself as installation and to the articulated room as root component within an urban environment. The gallery's 'white cube' may be seen as specimen space, the basic unit of vacant enclosure that structures the logic of all twentieth-century cities.

The X, as articulated by Priest, is conceived in its despecified, pared-down, integral formation. *A View of the City* is a rumination on the form itself, on 'profile and contour' merged to constitute an object.

Hence, the X is not presented as a crossing of two vectors, but rather as a fully integrated form created within itself. No seams are visible; no parts have been orchestrated to bisect or converge. Simply, the X iconically exists as a form receiving definition as pure profile and contour. Such conceptual specificity explains why pictorial features have been suppressed under the generic grey neutrality of a pristine paint finish. Definitions of form and object mingle within the contour of this colour.

The experience of these three X components produces a consciousness that begins with the body and stretches outward in four directions to infinity. This expansiveness, however, is only metonymical because each X is enclosed within the containing element of a square. Such a consistent enframing forces the work to act along coordinates set by certain sculpture associated with Minimalism. In a now famous pair of questions put to sculptor Tony Smith, the limits of experience defined by corporeality are phrased in elusive, yet assertive terms. Regarding the dimensions of his black cube sculpture *Die* (1962) which measures exactly 6 x 6 x 6 feet, Smith responds:

Q: Why didn't you make it larger so that it would loom over the observer?

A: I was not making a monument.

Q: Then why didn't you make it smaller so that the observer could see over the top?

A: I was not making an object.

Between 'monument' and 'object' – or, edifice and sculpture – the work of the creative mind must exist.

If the human body emerges as the prime determining referent, then it would seem no coincidence that Smith chose the size of precisely 6 feet for his "Die," a proportion powerfully given by Le Corbusier in his diagrammatic rendition of man. *The Modulor* (1946) stands exactly 1,829 mm high (6 feet) and is seen to reach upward with one arm to a height of 2,260 mm (nearly 7 feet 5 inches). The sectioning of anatomy into units, as diagrammed by Le Corbusier, pictures the human form as a complex system of proportion that redesignates it for innumerable modern situations, the age of prefabrication and industrialized techniques of building.

The X thus becomes a sign of subjectivity, fluctuating with one's constantly shifting location in, and in relation to the city. The three component parts of *A View of the City* express diversity of viewpoint in terms of viewing experience. It presents a scalar thesis: ratiocination imaged from diagram (painting/wall) to volume (sculpture/cube) to architecture (free-standing/form). It should be noted that in each component all three features could be seen to function. The referent begins with the body, the gallery space and moves outward to the city, in modular, scalar terms. The X is a motif that operates beyond the classicizing realm of perspective, and is thus suited ideally for late-century urban space – the atopic non-space of projection and simultaneity. It is a paradigm of structural method, for it remains intrinsic throughout contextualizations.

"The basic relativity of thought and meaning," Christopher Norris has observed, "is the starting point of structuralist theory." As the largest and most complex artifact man has produced, the city is an entity of maximal relativity. Throughout its construction one finds the X functioning in all strata of the city. As genetic

component crucial to the infrastructure of buildings (the welded steel cross-strut), to emblem displayed on/as facade element, its integral character emerges. Yet nowhere, perhaps, does it receive such rhetorical enunciation than along the precipice of skyscrapers. One famous example is given by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's Solow Building (1974), where along two sides of the tower an X responds to the sloping forces of aspiring height. Here the X seems to be a floating/binding metaphor: at once, keeping the building's faces apart, while also ensuring their mutual attachment, their immanent constitution as a free-standing tower.

As it appears in *A View of the City*, the X serves a discursive function. Changeless in internal scale and proportion, it is articulated in terms of variant size. Priest relies upon the X to propound the fundamental relativity, and reiterability of the city's structural constitution. It works against the grid, moving away from perspectival convergence. Its form is axiomatic and is formatted by Priest axonometrically. This articulation befits the array of possibility generated by its placement, remarking upon its lineage in numerous fields. Like Le Corbusier, the great twentieth-century model of interdisciplinary creator – architect, urban planner, painter, sculptor, writer, designer – the X purveys the idea that one unifying form will bring together, and be cathected by the panoply of context that enfolds creative thought. It reforms the Modulor, sign of the X.