

Thinghood

MOST ARCHITECTS SUFFER FROM AN AFFLICTION that can turn them unwittingly into a menace, even to cities they profess to love. It is normal for people who are susceptible to the dream of being an architect to get to get bitten by this insidious bug when they are young. Sometimes they are little kids; most often they are in that confusing limbo between childhood and adulthood known as college. What hooks them is the amazing, life-shaping experience of making something in a methodical, disciplined way for the first time. Almost always the act of seduction is the making of a thing—not making a party, not making a play, not making a garden. A thing, not an environment, narrative or a place—the distinction is important.

My own story is typical. By the age of twenty I had come to think that architects were cool and arty and that they were somehow connected to the great splendors of the world. Nothing else had seized hold of my future, so I felt compelled to try an introductory design course. After the very first assignment, that was it; my life-plan was settled.

That first assignment was a simple enough kindergartenish task, one conceived so that failure was unlikely, success probable. The instructor was youngish guy named Tom Williamson and he was the embodiment of what I thought an architect was supposed to be like – lean, sensitive looking, hair a little longer than was the fashion—a gestalt somewhere between stylish and bohemian scruffy. He liked to name-drop famous buildings and beautiful places he had been, which I thought was very cool. He showed us an enormous green book, a volume of Sweets Architectural File, a materials catalogue that must have weighed about fifteen pounds. The task was to purchase a box of toothpicks and make a structure from them that would both span over the catalogue and support its weight.

I started by laying toothpicks end to end to make a circle around the template of the catalogue. I discovered that by gluing little clusters of six toothpicks together I could make tetrahedrons. I then had the bright idea that if I made lopsided tetrahedrons all around the circle, they could eventually go together and make a dome. I didn't have the math skills to figure out how different the lengths of toothpicks needed to be to get the tetrahedrons lopsided in the right way, so I did it by trial and error. Lots of toothpicks; lots of glue; lots of trial; lots of error, but eventually after multiple sleepless nights and skipped classes, it worked. I had made a sort of geodesic dome (a term unknown to me), and it was strong as a house.

My dome was perfect. I had made perfection. Tom Williamson said so, and he imagined it as a big building where one could walk beneath the splendid points of the overhanging tetrahedrons. I was completely hooked. Oh, how I loved my tooth-pick dome; Brunelleschi could not

have loved his more.

Soon, I came to see (as one was taught to see), that the great architects of the day were toothpick dome makers par excellence. They had the perfectibility of objects down pat: they could create all-of-a-piece, perfect, Platonic things. Perfect and consistent, one idealized thing, inside and out. Kahn could do it; Mies could do it; and Frank Lloyd Wright could do it; and son-of-a-bitch, I could do it – just give me a shot. That is the standard architecture student epiphany.

Thinghood—the autonomy and integrity of building form is the main idea that I was taught in architecture school. In itself, it is not something bad. Quite the contrary. It is why we revere the buildings of all of the modern masters. Structure and space; pipes and structure; use and geometry—all congruent, all fitting together, perfectly, seamlessly.

In this view of buildings, they are not different in kind from other sorts of objects, like toasters, bicycles or race cars. Buildings can be beautiful in just the ways that those other things can be. The difference is that buildings unlike other objects are the constituent elements of cities, but cities are not simply aggregations of toasters, bicycles and race cars. The city is a meta-artifact comprised of artifacts, but not simply like toys in a box. The city has its own complex and transformative logic that shapes the nature of the things that comprise it. The city is an organism that tolerates many things, but not all things. The city is tough and resilient, but not infinitely so. Cities can be damaged and like other organisms, they can be killed by the things within it.

An undergraduate with his tube of glue and his box of toothpicks doesn't worry about these matters. He also doesn't realize that the box contains a hidden message enlisting him in the vast project of the Enlightenment, now into its third century and still soldiering on, despite a generation of post-modern skepticism. The message is about the redemptive power of reason; the rational shaping of the world; the perfectibility of things; progress; a better day to come – all in a box of toothpicks. Skepticism may come later for many reasons, but it will never completely outshine that thrilling moment when the little dome held up the giant catalogue without so much as a wince.

The perfectibility of toothpicks is both immanent and utopian. Buildings can be the embodiment of perfectibility, a palpable triumph of the rational. The best buildings are little utopias and their architects are little utopians. But does the perfectibility of many small things imply the perfectibility of everything? Do lots of little utopias make one big one? Maybe it is better not to ask the question and just do for the world what one can.

Better not to ask the question because it has already been answered, resoundingly all over the world. The big utopian project of the ruptured modernist city was a giant bust a long time ago—at Brasilia, at Chandigarh, in the catastrophe of American Urban Renewal, all over Europe. These days, Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin for Paris is taken to be either a tongue-in-cheek media stunt of its day or the ranting of a madman. In the great battle of Jane Jacobs versus the

Athens Charter of le Corbusier (the Koran of modernist town planning) the result was Jane by a knockout decades ago. Just ask any city planner what it is they believe in. The answer is likely to be in paragraph long block quotes (or near paraphrases if they don't quite have it straight) from *Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

Strangely, the universally acknowledged failure of big utopias has left little utopias largely unscathed. Big utopians are perceived as fools, but the rewards for making little utopias remain pervasive, tangible and immediate. People say nice things about you. If you are a student of architecture, it starts with your first student jury and, if you play your cards right, it continues through a lifetime, with fancier and fancier people saying nicer and nicer things. Even after you're dead. For many a twenty-year-old, it certainly appears to be something worth trying for. But some kids are better toothpick gluers than others. Kids who give smashing parties, or cook well, or tell funny stories aren't necessarily clever at making things. The good gluers were the ones who stuck it out through the purgatory of architecture school. Graduation was the triumph of the thing makers. These days, fancy new software has replaced toothpicks and glue, but those things on the luminous screen are even more disembodied from the world than the toothpicks of yore.

A perfect thing demands a perfect place to put the thing. It was a great frustration that my student apartment, shared with three messy guys, never provided the right setting for my beautiful dome. Not the mantle (too small), not the coffee table (too much stuff), nowhere in my shared bedroom. The white formica kitchen table worked fine for display when it was clean and empty, but it kept being pre-empted for lesser uses, like eating. In the white gallery, used as a jury room it had looked so smashing, but not so out in the mess of the world.

The mess of the world is a big problem for thing makers. These days it is rare to find someone who still takes seriously the 20th century proposition that the great cities of the world should be cleaned and emptied to make room for a new rationalist utopia. That idea is finally discredited beyond redemption, but all over the world the irreconcilable ill-fit between the form of buildings and the form of the continuous city is still with us. It's the thinghood thing. The love of thinghood is the unifying theme, modern architecture's main idea, the bond that unites the shards, the blobs, the shiny boxes, and the latest parametric warpages. Thinghood is somewhat like manhood—a point of pride, something to be asserted and defended, something male adolescents think is terrific. It is why Rem Koolhaas is so fond of the pithy epithet, *fuck context*.