

# Architecture and Its Double

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“All urban life aspires to this condition: flux, pastiche”.  
— Iain Sinclair, *London Orbital*

*Mouth watering.* The urban menu parades by in 4x3, striking letterings in kindergarten colours: Arby's (WE HAVE THE MEATS), Dairy Queen, Wendy's (CHOOSE FRESH), Chipotle (GET CHORIZO'D), Cocktail's Videogame, El Rancho Motel, WORLD PREMIERE, SALES 80%. Like a book or an advertising leaflet stuck on the windshield, with a pleasant feeling of movement, effortlessly turning from one item to the next. The suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee (USA), just like anywhere else in the world: poor, banal, sad hyper-outskirts, mostly dull and *vulgar* (hard to translate [into other languages]: roughly vernacular/popular, and so familiar it goes unnoticed), where the neo-capitalist melting-pot intersperses commercial solicitations, affordable entertainment with ease of access, and all FOR ONLY \$ 8.99.

We venture into the Centennial Park seeking a less brand-saturated horizon, along with some fresh air and green grass. We slow down in our rented car, letting it gently glide along slight bends in the road, and then suddenly, like a weird vision out of our memory or our imagination, IT emerges over across the median strip. What is IT? It's what my memory, chock-full of millions of images and narratives, swiftly identifies as the Parthenon! WTF!?! Is this the one from Athens, the temple dedicated to the glory of Athena Polias, in front of which Pericles walked and talked, the same one that later became a gunpowder magazine during the war against the Turks, the very same one we see in so many postcards and in Martin Parr's photographs, so full of British irony? Yes it's the very same one in all its majesty, better than the original itself, more like its true Platonic idea, rid of all slag, having descended upon this earth to say hi to the sensible world.

Surprise-effect gone, we park at the huge empty parking lot surrounding the building. Everything is car-friendly here; you never have to walk a long way from your car's door to your final destination. Doubts and stupefaction vanish at a few metres distance. It is indeed the same building. Massive, impressive. We slowly go around it, all the time enthralled by a troubling impression of sameness and otherness. Punctuated by the sculpted metopes, the long colonnade graciously encircles the

peristyle in its entirety. Over the architrave there rises the tympanum that harbours the birth of Athena. The acroteria are identical at every point. Even the optical correction has been replicated. There's a concern for the right detail. At any rate, this Parthenon is much better preserved than its model in Athens; it's quasi-intact, like a manufactured replica right out of a factory. It's barely a century old, as we learn from an information panel in three languages that recounts how it was built, its history and its function – all of it peppered with amusing anecdotes meant to create a kind of chumminess with the tourists.

What is the source of the strangeness this sight makes us feel? It's not simply about a fragment of ancient history's imaginary translocation to the heart of America; it's rather about the life-size reproduction of a whole building *ne varietur*. A question comes to mind: Are there doubles in architecture? Imitations are well known; here and there one finds “after-the-manner-of” experiments, or a building's style being replicated across countries, or Palladio's or Bernini's influence throughout Europe and beyond. But perfect copies? In a certain sense, the uniqueness of buildings far exceeds that of works from any other artistic field – whether they be paintings, sculptures, or musical scores –, which makes it difficult for them to be replicated exactly as they stand. The anchoring to the ground, the imposing prospect, and social usage render an architectural work less amenable to replication and replacement by a *doppelgänger*. The copy would be spotted and its effect would be nullified. No substitutability is possible. It's not the singularity of the creative moment that endows a building with this remarkable individuality, but location itself. A building always implicates the space it occupies and interacts with. A perfect copy would therefore require an exact replication of its geographical coordinates, which is obviously impossible. It's true that a building never quite remains identical to itself: its form and contents do evolve over time. Deterioration may of course lead to partial repairs that may end up amounting to a complete overhaul. As with Theseus' ship, it may be the case that none of the original components actually remain in place in the end, the building having strangely become its own replica through its multiple restorations over the years. However, whereas a painting or a sculpture possess an irreplaceable uniqueness (which generates what Benjamin called their *aura*, the sacred halo that keeps spectators – and their *Gemüt* – at a distance), thereby encouraging a parallel market for copies, which may even entice malicious or brilliant substitutions – which are, after all, absolutely legal in museums where, for reasons of security or preservation, copies must pass off as originals – architecture by contrast is almost completely exempt from counterfeit works. This doesn't mean it's not reproducible *per se*. There is no technical obstacle. The problem is that no copy, however perfect it might be, could ever guarantee the uncanny role of the substitute. It's therefore architecture's situationality in itself – site, construction history, the public's attendance, etc. – that prevents copies much more efficiently than any authenticity test devised against attempts at forgery. Thus, replicas cannot be made for purposes of preservation, nor can copies be made for exchange. This doesn't mean, however, that in architecture the phenomenon of *mimesis* is unknown – on the contrary, architecture is actually much more subjected to it than any other art, as though its non-reproducible nature entailed a proliferation of imitations of all kinds.

Pastiche usually consists in borrowing a model's style or some of its elements, yet this does not necessarily involve a complete copy of the original. A disparaging moral judgement is often attached to this artistic technique. The pastiche-mixers are believed to be incapable of producing

anything original by themselves, therefore lacking imagination, or to be seeking – through parody – to mock the work they are revisiting and somehow caricaturing. It's a kind of imitation that cannot actually avoid eliciting a smile. Citation is successful insofar as it takes advantage of this gap with regard to the original work's horizon of expectations. The disappointment of not seeing that a copy is thus accompanied by an ironic compensation which turns weakness into a parodic gesture. But this is not always the case; pastiche may have nobler intentions, such as recognition. Quite often, pastiche-makers place themselves in a position of inferiority, paying homage to the model they are revisiting. The boundary between reverential imitation – long a staple of Western artistic education – and pastiche may be rather thin.

It's not clear whether the worldwide trend for reproductions of pre-existing buildings is connected to our pastiche age; its point of departure – i.e., at the beginning of the urban, industrial age, leaving aside Renaissance imitations of Antiquity – was originally an attitude of devotional admiration. The life-size replication of a well-known architecture was permissible as a way of somehow tapping its aura, its symbolic power, through a sort of geographical as well as mental transfer of its glory. Thus architectural signs travel too; imaginaries are transferred across continents. Just as a plant may cross the ocean attached to a piece of wooden flotsam, and then find a spot to grow in an island far away from its birth soil, generating a new species, similarly, cultural features may travel through the seas of history and colonise other territories like weeds. Numerous buildings in modern republics have almost exactly replicated ancient ones in order to accrue this supplement of legitimacy. Court houses, parliaments, and universities have plagiarised ancient architecture in order to acquire a patina of history and grandeur. Reference was reverence. It sanctified the past even as it tried to elevate the present. In a certain sense, this replication regime still partakes of Nietzsche's “grand style” as described in *Twilight of the Idols*:

Architecture is a kind of eloquence of power in forms — now persuading, even flattering, now only commanding. The highest feeling of power and sureness finds expression in a grand style. The power which no longer needs any proof, which spurns pleasing, which does not answer lightly, which feels no witness near, which lives oblivious of all opposition to it, which reposes within itself, fatalistically, a law among laws — that speaks of itself as a grand style.

In recent times, architectural reproduction is ostensibly carried out in accordance with different criteria. It's no longer a question of absorbing the model's value into the copy, but rather the goal is to simply play with that value. Certain amusement parks, such as France Miniature in Elancourt, offer us samples of world-renowned buildings, around which the tourists walk, like drunken Gullivers, under the impression that they are travelling. The widespread *thematization* of entertainment architecture also resorts to this play of references. Casino hotels in Las Vegas or Macao simulate cities, monuments, or architectural wonders (Paris, Venice, New York, Angkor Vat, etc) not simply in order to receive a sacred unction of glamour (no one is fooled by the *trompe l'œil*, and the engineers' borderline-pathological pursuit of realism never manages to elicit more than a slight amazement), but with the aim of creating an immediately recognisable perceptual universe. The über-urbanites' brains are saturated with images and information to such a degree – nearly to the point of cognitive

explosion –, that marketing’s fairy-godmothers don’t want to further trouble them by adding up to the pile of confusion, and instead entice them with clear, identifiable visions – clichés in the proper sense of the term – that appease their overheated minds. In the midst of the suburban jungle emerges an Egyptian pyramid, an Easter Island statue, a Venetian palace, etc., namely, anything that can be found in globalised memory, which thus operates like a sort of personal bank account from which we can endlessly withdraw funds. The effect is instantaneous: recognition and adherence. For quite obviously, therein lies the key: to create the minimal attachment immediately allowing for other relationships – and maybe more. Better pastiche than indifference or speechless shock. Citation as homage is no longer the case here. We are now in the fast, consumable universe of instant availability, of Heidegger’s “de-severance” (*Ent-fernung*) of the world: the undoing of distance for the sake of closeness-at-hand, ready to be appropriated. Countless development projects in China copy European cities, palaces, or famous monuments down to the last detail. This is not a mere transfer of technologies, or even imaginaries (and even less so, of erudite cultures), but rather the direct consequence of the opening of the mind to the worldwide network of signs. While in the past replication was aimed at lofty goals of social edification, in a somewhat conceited gesture that aspired to inscription in history through the imitation of its great periods (San Francisco’s City Hall imitating the dome of Saint-Louis-des-Invalides in Paris), in our times reproduction is deployed in the most ordinary, horizontal domain of vernacular entertainment, business, or housing architecture. It’s no longer the State that chooses to resort to imitation as bait, but private corporations that turn generalised simulation into a development principle.

However void of meaning architecture may be, since it merely exhibits pure forms and what they contain, under the mimetic yoke it becomes here a sort of Arts & Crafts schoolmistress displaying on the dashboard, before the children of mass consumerism, an enchanted album of renowned monuments. She does not merely limit herself to dividing the terrain into a grid, she aspires to sculpt the volume according to her rules; she somehow geometrises air and movement. While surveyors limit themselves to logically delimiting terrains in the land registry, architects mathematise the third dimension. But vernacular architecture, mixing popular constructions and ultra-capitalist buildings, swiftly covers this purely rational structuration of volume with images and symbols. It dresses up the cube projecting known representations (here again we find Venturi’s and Scott-Brown’s famous decorated hangar); that’s the reason why it resorts to copies and imitations so frequently. This accounts not merely for its playful passion for misappropriations in advertising, but mostly also for its will to disguise the austere severity of constructive *ratio* with a shimmering book of mimetic façades. Thus the “urban sentence”, to employ a term coined by Jean-Christophe Bailly, often refers to common places in language and space. It relies on banal expressions, conventional formulas, which guarantee the *phatic* function of language, i.e. the connection with viewers/interpreters. It’s not surprising then that these 1:1 scale models of a famous building on the other side of the world – for example a castle from the Loire region in France replicated in a village somewhere in Brazil, or the Giza Sphinx in the Shijiazhuang area 300 km away from Beijing – should make us feel a sort of *Unheimlichkeit*, an uncanny feeling of familiarity in strangeness, as if nothing could be more disorienting for the mind than the repetition of the same, and this kind of otherness lying at the heart of the self-same, this madness of identity. This anxiety is normally dispelled by reacting in amusement. Yet there remains nevertheless a

vivid impression of individuality having been violated and cloned, in other words, negated, and of our being witnesses to that mutilation as incarnated in the perfect copy.

It’s not strange, therefore, to find, in these mall-strip outskirts, such a simultaneously naïf and astute deployment of traditional imageries. As one idles by on these three-lane conveyor belts called urban freeways, one has the impression of traversing a huge factory where signs and monuments are being recycled. The disposable legends of corporate capitalism love to dwell on the same narratives and the same images. Like a soothing lullaby for consumers. Vernacular architecture thus often falls in the trap of replication, especially in a universe of speed and constant flux which paradoxically generates the converse need for a fixed identity. We must not see in this worldwide lust for urban imitation and architectural pastiche a simple complicity with cheap swank, but rather, on the contrary, the perhaps inevitable, sane reaction of human sensibility in the face of commercial hyper-solicitation through replication. What we have here is a defensive strategy on the users’ part: they filter the ever new, aggressive, and swift stimuli in accordance with identifiable patterns. Chronic attention deficit disorder sculpts its own environment by itself. Confronted with minds capable only of attention spans lasting seconds, architecture sacrifices its nature as enduring inscription in time and space to the advantage of fleeting iconic effects. It sets aside stasis, all that lasts and forms a world, to turn without second thoughts to the precariousness of mobile, superficial spectacles. This world of simulation that Baudrillard was so fond of, as he saw in it the eschatological end of meaning and the almost joyous acceptance of post-historical nihilism, does not always generate poor quality ersatz, though. Sometimes some creations slide into this catch-all mimetic process that, either through hybridisation or disadjustment, are quite original. And to one’s bafflement, one finds a displaced element under a banal reproduction. Each local culture thereby adapts the models according to its needs and expectations. The vernacular synthesises traditions and migrations. Despite its frequent resemblance to a cheap stage-set for a low-cost sit-com, or, in other words, its lack of depth and ambiguity, this architecture of the double may sometimes generate singular universes. Autopia, which has somehow subjected urban man to the car’s kinesthetic and perceptual schemas for nearly a century now, has managed to create a new sociability: the recognition of a signified in a split second at 60 km/h. This is nothing, and there is no reason to deplore this fact in the name of some ideal age when meaningful exchanges took place in quiet lounges following venerable patterns of conversation. Within the urban flow’s continuous disorder, the mimetic architecture of themed restaurants, fun hotels, and amusement parks valorises what is well known. Our cities’ “existing landscape” must not be acknowledged as an insurmountable horizon or a norm to be followed under all circumstances (the only reality that is ours and we must worship, as is commonly believed by the heirs of post-modernist thought, who in fact work within the status quo), but as a new ground for analysis, neither commodity dystopia nor globalization utopia, where the communicative poverty of this system of puerile and facile references can be dissected live, in order to flush out both the ideological-economic structure that generated it, and the discrepancies that turn it into something other than a simple replication. The suburban artist’s role is once again to find out the sparkle of singularity within the mimetic death drive, to track down, under a seductive wink’s coarse effects, the disarray of meaning itself, something irreducible to the game of citations. In other words, where borrowings stand, the improvised must occur.

