AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSH COMAROFF AND ONG KER-SHING

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In the course of their interview with Jarad Zimbler, Josh Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing expand upon the potential of 'poor form' to instantiate and animate critiques about the nature of architectural production. Inherent to form itself, they argue, are the critical tools that unsettle its capturing within the logic of commodity capitalism.

Jarad Zimbler (JZ): What is it about architectural failure that is horrifying, rather than simply disappointing? Or, to put it another way, when is awkwardness simply awkwardness, rather than something more dramatic (horror, menace etc.)?

Josh Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing (JC and OKS): This is an important question. Our belief is that architectural failure can be *both* horrifying and disappointing. And that it can also be funny, exhilarating, beautiful, and instructive. In our paper—and to a greater degree, in our book—we try to make the case that "poor" or awkward form does not provide the same anodyne solutions as works that are situated comfortably within typological and linguistic traditions. The types have, in a sense, "run away" from the potentials of language to order them.

We have tried, though, to divorce this form of failure from qualitative judgements. We are trying to separate the notion of "poor" from the tradition of "bad" or "ugly." In fact, the buildings that we describe are some of our favourites, and are the

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precedents which inform our own design work. In this way, *Horror In Architecture* stands as a strange sort of manifesto. We argue that these works are able to articulate alternative ways of making architecture, and also to describe their own social and economic predicaments.

The passage into the dramatic, into horror and menace, might happen in many ways. Often, this has to do with the context in which the awkwardness of the building comes to be. The scale of Singapore's Pinnacle housing is alarming. The same scalar effect in Speer's Nazi war memorial program in genuinely terrifying. The mass repeptition of Hilberseimer housing blocks in Chicago's North Side can be exhilarating, or depressing, depending upon your reaction to Modernism. In Cabrini Green, it was acutely menacing.

JZ: You speak of an 'unease' that 'remains endemic in the built environment' and that arises as the consequence of an inadequacy of architectural languages to new typologies. Who is it that feels this unease? The student of architecture? The city's current inhabitants? Or anyone who has encountered or will encounter the building in question?

JC and OKS: This unease operates, and is perceived, on many levels. As we know, the notion of an urban malaise—such as Simmel's "blasé attitude"—has become part of the originary myth of Modernism. The idea of the urban (and the urban building) as a locus of shock is not new. This can be perceived in a vague sense, or it can be understood more precisely by those who are able to describe the ways in which such shock is communicated.

An architect can understand the unprecedented—and by 19th century standards, post-human—scale of a building such as Marshall Field's, in Chicago. We can articulate its unseemly repetition, its awkward position between Neoclassicism and Modernism, its peculiar use of scale and material. But likewise anyone who has spent a few hours shopping in it, or simply trying to understand its totality on foot, will feel utterly overwhelmed. This is even more the case in the hypertrophied contemporary equivalents, such as West Edmonton Mall.

Our understanding is that many of us feel the unease, but we do so in different ways. Our role as interpreters, hopefully, is to make the perception more precise and available to general criticism.

JZ: You relate the experience of architectural horror to an experience of the sublime, of magnitude or power in excess of understanding, but there is another way of understanding horror, as fright domesticated for pleasure and catharsis. Does this kind of horror play any part in contemporary experiences of the built environment?

JC and OKS: Yes, horror should be understood in a broad spectrum that connects Romantic ideas (which relate its experience to the sublime) to other experiences of horror in popular culture. The introduction to *Horror in Architecture* is, in large part, a description of this spectrum—in no small part a shift of emphasis toward pleasure and catharsis.

We invoke the Romantic notion of the sublime, in our book, as the starting point in a social history of horror. We conjure it, in particular, because we believe that a certain "politics of the sublime"—a perhaps post-political impulse toward the affective—is on the rise in the contemporary cultural moment.

But our own trajectory, and (admittedly) our own interest, quickly shifts to the moment when horror becomes a form of entertainment, pleasure, and imaginative exploration. We would not argue for the positive, or negative, benefits of horror as a sublime emotion; in fact, we make the point that Romantic discourses were perhaps too credulous about the moral benefits of shock. Moreover, we feel that the emphasis on the building as purely a conductor of emotion obscures the many other ways in which it may communicate aesthetic and cultural meaning.

For us, horror becomes most interesting in its "lowest" contemporary form, when it becomes a mode of contemplating bio-physical deviance. This would take place, for example, in the films of David Cronenberg. The buildings in our book are chosen because we feel that their awkwardness, their own deviance with respect to naturalized conventions, is articulate and compelling. It not only provides a testament to the changing conditions of their production, but it also contains within itself a certain tolerance toward alternative modes of being-in-the-world.

This is where we make a distinction between "horrifying" buildings, and those that articulate analogues of horror in other media. Whereas the former notion might invoke positive or negative associations, either due to aesthetic value or neo-Romantic sympathies, the latter have more to do with a transformative aesthetics that we feel to be both socially and architecturally productive.

JZ: You say that form has a particular and fairly straightforward meaning for architects, but what of content? What is comprehended by this term?

JC and OKS: Architects have many ways of speaking about the "contents" (frequently pluralized) of a building. Often, this term is used in a literal sense, referring to the collection of objects or activities that are housed within. These are often spoken of separately, however: the term "content" may be too expansive to be useful, as the contents themselves are of such diverse character. Architects have a quite complex and nuanced awareness of the interior lives of buildings: their decoration, space-making, social life, and technical infrastructures. The form-content dichotomy is rendered somewhat turbid by the fact that, at any moment, form can be multiply related to these independent and qualitatively different contents—and architects would probably consider the relation to each in distinct terms.

What is important to understand is that the dualism of form/content is not commonly understood, by architects, in a way that is analogous to other fields. This is, in part, because architecture is not a figural art in any straightforward sense. Buildings are not "representational" in the more direct ways that sculptural works, or paintings, or literary works are. Of course, buildings represent things: ideals, values, social power, and the like. They can, as in the case of Holocaust museums, attempt to "represent" a specific historical incident through their form. But the way that buildings communicate is, at a basic level, different. They are inhabited objects, spatial and functional. And, as a result, their interpretations by Frederic Jameson and others are sometimes frustrating, because the building is often forced (almost like sculpture) to assume a representational role. In these, there is often an assumed core "content," or message, about which the form of the building "speaks". This can result in a simplification, and it is a type of reading that we would resist.

We would also point out that—as is the case with the other arts—there is a "content" to form itself, which is independent of the technical or social contents referred to above. Form is, after all, a great repository of meaning. It is, in many ways, our institutional memory, and our instrument of predication. For example, a form can reference past architectures, and be used to comment on them by invoking their conventions.

JZ: You address context in broadly socio-economic terms, but isn't architectural context also important for aesthetic judgement? Doesn't the success or failure of a particular building depend as much on the local topography and history of forms as it does on the adequacy of form to typology?

JC and OKS: For ourselves, we are not confident that one can talk about "architectural context" as something independent of economic context. It is certainly true that architecture is not, in any simple sense, reducible to economy. This would be a very

vulgar notion, and (hopefully) difficult to reconcile with the working experience of the architect. And certainly, there remain "cultures" of architectural practice, at locations around the world, that are distinct from one another.

But we must also acknowledge that many forces which face architects when they practice—not only of economy but of broader cultural logic—are increasingly trans-local. We all face the problem of the repetitive character of housing, for example. How architects approach this problem has a lot to do with architectural context, to be sure. Singaporean architects, for example, often embrace the aesthetics of repetition in a very direct manner, while their American colleagues tend to try and "humanize" or downplay it.

But it is very clear, in this example, that the root "problem" that defines this architectural object is the calculus of value placed upon the house, or on housing, when it becomes a commodity. And there is not, to our knowledge, an architectural context or tradition that has been—for historical or cultural reasons—more equipped to solve this problem than any other.

There remains a very interesting tension, however, between local and trans-local influences, and we remain fascinated by the variety of design responses that it informs.

JZ: The examples you analyse in detail come mostly from the US and Singapore. How might your understanding of poor form help architects and urban planners in South Africa and elsewhere in the global South?

JC and OKS: This is true; the examples given in the paper are mainly from outside the global South, and this was perhaps an odd choice for a paper presented at JWTC. The examples in the book are hopefully more wide-ranging, and speak to other circumstances.

We mention, for example — after Achille Mbembe — that many examples of colonial and post-colonial urbanism seem to develop under the "sign of the monstrous," as they have so much to do with a forced re-adjustment of cultural and territorial inheritances.

More directly, perhaps, we discuss how the forces that generate what we call "poor form" exercise tremendous influence on the development of buildings and cities beyond the global North. This is particularly important in the burgeoning cities of Africa and Latin America, for example, where a convulsive urbanization is leading to a wild inflation of urban land values. This is combined with a heightened perception of risk, and creates precisely the kind of pressures that push buildings in unfortunate directions: toward, in particular, a fortress-like interiorization and an impoverishment of urban space.

The production of such "control spaces," mixed-use developments and large-scale shopping centres, has been central to the Singaporean experience. But we see them now throughout South Africa, in Brazil, in Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria and Sri Lanka. These may be inevitable, but they do not need to come at the price of more conventionally "public" spaces. We hope that the planners and architects of the global South are less quick to relinquish these.

JZ: You speak of architecural failure as offering a means of exposing the badness of the present. To some extent, however, this is taken for granted from the outset, and your experience of horror seems primarily a reponse to the commercial purposes to which the new mega-strucutural typologies cater. What is it then that poor form itself tells us about the badness of the present? What might it teach us that we cannot not learn from, say, Fredric Jameson or the Frankfurt School?

JC and OKS: "Badness" is an interesting word to use as a descriptor of the present. While we generally do take for granted a negativity in our world-view, we actually avoid invoking this notion in our book, for a few reasons.

What we are after, analytically, is not a badness *for itself*, but an account of underlying pressures that shape architecture and the built environment. These stem, as we have argued, from the capture of buildings within a commodity logic, and they lead to the production of spaces of inhabitation that become, in many aspects, monstrous. But how they do so is not obvious; their effect on both form and the underlying typology are complex and mediated. Understanding how these forces shape the spaces in which we live is more our focus than a qualitative evaluation of the results.

We ask, moreover, why this effect should be so pervasive. Horror is much more far-reaching, in our estimation, than the "purposes" of commercial architecture. At the least, it extends far beyond buildings that are explicity commercial—such pressures begin to affect a broad spectrum, from malls

to homes to properly "civic" buildings (for example, Koolhaas' IIT student center, which eerilly resembles a shopping centre).

In short, what poor forms show us is a process by which the built environment becomes post-human, alienating, or *unheimlich*, and connects it to trends in capitalism at large. Here, there is certainly great overlap with the Frankfurt School—although, to our knowledge, their work is more focused upon other cultural media. We find less analytical commonality with Jameson, although his broader theorization of the cultural moment is highly astute. In relating buildings *in particular* to larger shifts in capital, we would see our work owing more to Manfredo Tafuri's, for example.