

Paper Three: Anthony Vidler and the Urban Uncanny (Oneirism)

"A contemporary philosopher of urban architecture is faced then, at the end of the twentieth century, not so much with the absolute dialectic of ancient and modern posed by the avant- and rear gardes of the last eighty years, as with the more subtle and difficult task of calculating the limits of intervention according to the resistance of the city to change."

Anthony Vidler's description of calculating the limits of architectural intervention according to the resistance of the city to change was published in his book, *The Architectural Uncanny*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994. Serving as a professor and chairman of the department of Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles, Vidler also published the work *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux: Architecture and Social Reform at the end of the Ancien Regime*. It is in these works that Vidler questions the modern condition in historical and theoretical terms that explore complex relations and associations.

By referencing the urban projects and critiques of the Dutch architects OMA, Wiel Arets, and Wim van den Bergh, Vidler places the spatial conditions and implications of the architectural uncanny in urban contexts. By siting the anxiety and paranoia of the individual in the topos of the city, Vidler attempts to contradict modernist notions of urban forms with the underlying traces of memory and residue. In his categorization of the urban uncanny, Vidler reverts to dream-like qualities as determinates for form. The ultimate work the architects he references become non-subjective forms that favor uncertainty and the nomadic in place of the fixed or grounded. Using memory and Dali's "paranoid critical method," the intangibles of the unconscious become the domain of architecture and the city.

These theoretical positions of Vidler and the Dutch architects displaced utopian ideals of the rejection of the city with the assumption that the city embodies our own paranoia. Memory cannot be erased with a modernist value, any more than the city can change with a singular project. These ideals have been developing in the works of these architects both in the presence of the built, and the publishing of books such as Rem Koolhaas's 1978 work *Delirious New York*, and the journal *Wiederhalle*, of which Arets and van den Berg are founding editors.

Vidler's urban uncanny, explored through these architects, faces the complexities of multiplicity and limits. In accepting psychological projects onto urban environments, our own mental positioning is called into question. To accept cities as collective sites is a pragmatic necessity. However, to explore the underlying traces of memory and paranoia in architectural form allows for a further displacement of the individual in the city. To accept not only one memory or anxiety, but also multiple orders and dis-orders sites the occupant not in a city in relation to themselves, but rather in the dreamworld of the collective. While one cannot discount the works of these individuals or of Vidler himself, one must question the acceptance of commonalities in city occupation. In as much as Vidler expresses the desire for works that become the repressed uncanny of our psyches, he negates the exploration of those factors that are directly related to presence.

While the initial questioning of the limits of architectural form in urban environment is highly relevant, the conduits of memory and anxiety should not be given preference as form givers. By their very essence, these ideals are reactions or interpretations of conditions that exist or have existed. It is in this notion that the determinates for urban architecture can easily be displaced. While generative forms have to respond to existing forces, be they physical or psychological, they exist on their own, detached from projected neuroses.

This is a difficult position give form to, and in that regard, Vidler and the Dutch architects have surmounted a complex position. The incorporation of a city's memory into form without the making of monuments is a difficult task. Further, tracing the changes of both the city and the subconscious requires an acceptance of psychological presence. By subverting formal issues with the uncanny, the exploration of spatial conditions begins to question meaning and origin rather than shape or configuration.

¹ Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny*. Cambridge MIT Press, 1994, p.199.