ENIGMA: DEFAMILIARIZING THE FAMILIAR

In his 1965 untitled work, sculptor and theorist Robert Morris presents a simple series of four three-foot by 3-foot by 2-foot cubes made of fiberglass. Perfectly situated equally and evenly on the floor of a New York gallery, these cubes are seen as four primitives simply set beside one another and appear quite familiar. Morris refers to it as a Gestalt—each single cube appearing part of the whole.

What appears unfamiliar is the forced, distorted, if unreal, perspective of each of the cubes individually and in unity. The familiar object, the primitive, has been defamiliarized through a careful distortion that challenges the viewer to reassess not only the cubic form but the way in which we see in perspective. It is an enigma.

Morris refers to this enigma as a "visual frustration" that challenges our expectations. post-minimalist art of the 1960s aimed to rethink paradigms of minimalist art, pushing toward new ideas in perception, abstraction, figuration, and representation through careful disfiguration of part-to-whole relationships.

Whereas Morris' postmodern work turned towards the post-minimal, Patrick Tighe's contemporary work moves towards the post-digital. Digital architecture of the 1990s to 2000s focused on generating innovative continuous complex-curvilinear forms of tessellated multiplicity through primitive geometries. It posed very discipline-specific, inner-referential, object-oriented designs of pure abstraction. Post-digital architecture, however, has brought a return to the real in an attempt to rethink the language and practice of architecture. It is not a move away from the digital but a hyperdetailed analytical investigation of digital forms and their practices.

Tighe's Tigertail house, for example, rethinks folded topological geometries. Employed ad infinitum since the 1990s by late-deconstructivist architects, folded geometric planes move from ground, to wall, to roof unifying buildings in holistic continuity. For Tighe, the familiar here becomes defamiliar in the over-exaggerated cantilevered roof form that draws our attention toward these folded planes of the house. The hyper-cantilevered roof separates from the overall design, proving an enigma. It is a gesture that challenges our perceptions, creating a looming presence that brings into question the concept of a folded plane. Yet it draws our attention to the site conditions and circulation of the house from the entry, toward the courtyard, and to the centralized pool at the back. For Tighe, the ground becomes a wall, then a roof that gestures toward the sky. The exaggerated roof plane becomes the telltale figure of the Tigertail house, visually legible and rhetorically meaningful. Defamiliarization here reveals the concept/idea of the design. It poses the place where one is to look to understand Tighe's architecture.

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We see this same form of disfiguration in Tighe's Jacobs Subterranean house design, where the "up and down" staircase performs a similarly familiar postmodern trope. Robert Venturi, back in 1964, originally rethought the paradigm of a "stair" by questioning the limits, if not the very notion, of what a stair was and could be. This was posited through an uncomfortable, if not awkward, shift in the rise, run, and path of a stair. Tighe here designs a similarly challenging stair that rises and falls, and goes up and goes down, rethinking the history of the grand overtly symmetrical redundancy of the Beaux-Arts stair. The added shift in the wall plane of the Jacobs Subterranean house is reminiscent of the interior spaces of Robert Weine's 1920 film The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, alongside the elongated stair treads of architect Alvar Aalto's famous stair in the Villa Mairea House.

Tighe engages in a discourse of familiarity: the proverbial Beaux-Arts stair, the expressionist stair, the modernist stair, the postmodernist stair, as wells as the deconstructivist stair, all at once. This historic discourse helps us to rethink the very notion of a stair. Through a few playful gestures and moves of distortion, disfigurement, and deconstruction, it brings to attention the habitual familiarity of the stair and how a stair may be used.

This playful disfiguring and reconfiguring of a familiar trope in architecture—whether it is a stair in the Jacobs Subterranean house, the corner façade treatment of the La Brea Housing design, the guard rail of the Sierra Bonita Mixed-Use Affordable Housing project, or in the stair at one of his most accomplished designs, the Montee Karp residence—are linguistic signs that point toward valued meaning within Tighe's projects. They are specific tectonic elements that become separated from the overall design visually and architecturally through enigmatic juxtapositions. They draw our attention to specific design elements that, upon close analysis, reveal cultural engagement with modern and contemporary design discourses, as well as ideas about site, program, and linguistic practices in architecture.

The Montee Karp house is a terrific example of Tighe's expertise. Presented as a white, pristine crystalline form, the house takes on the familiar image of a pitched-roof house (which it was before the remodel), alongside very contemporary formal strategies that disfigure primitive monolithic geometries. This is not a unique practice but a very familiar one. Of interest to contemporary post-digital artists and architects alike during the past decade—primitive vocabularies, entirely embedded in the software we use (Maya/Rhino), can be employed through additive and subtractive box-modeling Boolean techniques to generate innovative form. Unlike complex curvilinear surfaces generated through

Nurbs-modeling techniques, box modeling can provide us with an architecture of developable surfaces that, if dynamic and computer-generated, are also quite easy to fabricate and build. Primitive geometric forms are at once monolithic, generating a complete whole, while at the same time readily disfigured.

Box modeling in architecture has become quite familiar. Disruptions, breaks, awkward gestures, and discontinuous moments within such vocabularies produce unfamiliar territories: the distorted pivoting door, the thin-perspectival-corner-strip window, the shallow-monolithic-chamfered sink, the hovering-garage portico. These elements that stand out from the overall monolithic abstract Gestalt figure are important signs. Similar to what Roland Barthes argues in his famous essay "The Third Meaning." These disfiguring elements call our attention, suggesting that the viewer imagine new forms of meaning—for example, the way the new roof of the addition to the Montee Karp house pitches to form part of a solid that wraps around the original house. At once, it unifies with the original house, forming a Gestalt between old and new, but then separates from it with distorted angularity. It suggests the rethinking of the original house itself.

The contemporary house is not entirely different from the traditional house. Similar to where the Vanna Venturi façade explored traditional elements of the familiar by reconfiguring, reclaiming, and reconstituting them within a new postmodern vocabulary—contemporary post-digital architecture uses digital practices to rethink the elements of contemporary building design. Akin to the deconstructivists of the 1960s to 1980s, we have recently begun to utilize shifts in perspective, distortions in surface pattern, and a wide range of disfigurements in rhetorically meaningful ways to generate intelligent design practices.

These are the questions posed in Tighe's most recent works, the West Cork Arts Center, the Taichung Fine Arts Museum and Library, and Twin. The distortion of the primitive monolith sophisticatedly draws focus and attention to the main concept of each design. The West Cork Arts Center presents a tubular architecture, for example, reminiscent of early extruded digital design vocabularies with a carefully crafted set of end conditions—one crude and simply cut (the familiar) and the other deconstructed and enigmatic (the unfamiliar). Tighe takes the proverbial corner window to a new extreme linguistic sensibility. Here, the corner-glazed-window-wall-floor relationship becomes a unique configuration, one inseparable element that is illusionary, visually frustrating, and conceptually challenging. We are inspired to ask ourselves what would it feel like to walk on a glass floor—one that is not a floor per se but a window that is not a window but also a wall.

More provocative than simply walking across a modern glass cube or simple cast-glass floor, you are able to move in your mind's eye from a solid floor to walking upon a window. The corner window is still represented as a window. It still reads linguistically as a window. But it is now also becoming a floor. It is at once a floor while at the same time part of a corner window assembly. These part-whole relationships are rhetorical, representational, and in that simple move, what we might call neo-postmodern.

With the return to linguistic meaning in architecture, as demonstrated by the West Cork Arts Center, the Taichung Fine Arts Museum and Library brings forward the return of the digitally designed complex curvilinear, continuous smooth forms of the 1990s. Wall, floor, and roof, as Frederick Kiesler had originally imagined it best in the Endless House of the 1960s, has here returned with a glitch. It is now cut, cracked, broken, ruptured. The distortion in the holistic form along the center of the roof, through to the window, draws our focus and attention. The continuous forms are of course very familiar, but the cut that breaks the system is not. It combines the skylight and window, adding tension to the design. Tension is a moment held open by the unease of incompletion, where anticipation and the desire for completion is left unfulfilled and unresolved.

The cut draws our interest toward a centralizing courtyard and organizational strategy of the plan. This is the critical mark of this design, and if here, it is somewhat unresolved, the same idea is picked up again in the Twin. The cut is severe, revealing the circulation and organizational strategy of the building containing the main stair. The cut in the overall continuous surface of the distorted primitive forms of the house defines the path of entry that slips between the outer skin of the wall, and reappears as apertures for rear balconies and other windows.

The skin becomes the main figure in this design, which is bent, shaped, and chamfered around the interior space of each unit. The overall figure, if distorted, becoming again quite familiar—where the tectonic elements of stair, window, skylight, and balcony all become the discursive and descriptive aspects of the house. The architectural elements formulate a language that communicate and speak about the design. When learning to read a building, one must look to the unfamiliar, and in the case perhaps of the Twin becoming all too familiar, we might ask the designer to   challenge us even more.

Significantly, architecture does not need to search outside itself to become linguistic. It does not need to mimic or reconfigure outmoded, nostalgic, or antiquated figures from past vocabularies to become intelligent and legible. It can and arguably should employ a contemporary vocabulary in new and innovative ways to engage in a discussion of cultural

value and meaningful dialogue. Great architects construct their own architectural language. And to have a language that is relevant and discursive, it must speak to ever-evolving contemporary issues. Although it is important to share common ground with one's peers for architecture to engage in discourse and debate, once an architect's language becomes readily understood, complete, and whole within itself (i.e. too familiar), it becomes normal, habitual, unconscious, and boring.

For Robert Morris, a 64-sided figure may be difficult to comprehend in its entirety at first, but once its regularity is identified, it becomes whole and with that dismissed as understood. Irregularity thereby becomes very important to a designer. It can particularize a specific quality, drawing attention to what is different. Taken to the extreme however, a complex crystalline form, for example, can subvert any effort to comprehend the whole, creating weak Gestalts as they cannot be readily comprehended. They remain irrelevant and undecipherable in parts. A building form too complex that never forms a Gestalt is unresolvable and arguably lacks cohesion of design. A building form, sleek, synthetic, and complete, becomes a one-liner, simplistic, and readily dismissed.

Gaming part-whole relationships is thereby very important to developing valued subject-object relationships. Ambiguity, enigma, irregularity, distortion, discontinuity, and unfamiliarity all challenge monolithic Gestalt shapes, forms, and patterns. They generate curiosity and intensity. They frustrate visual perception and legibility. The tension generated between an overall design, pattern, or form—a Gestalt against moments of rupture and fragmentation—is paramount to understanding a type of contemporary formalism rooted in post-minimalist and postmodern interests of the 1960s. Paired with well-developed retooling and rethinking, it is what we might call the deconstructivist twist.