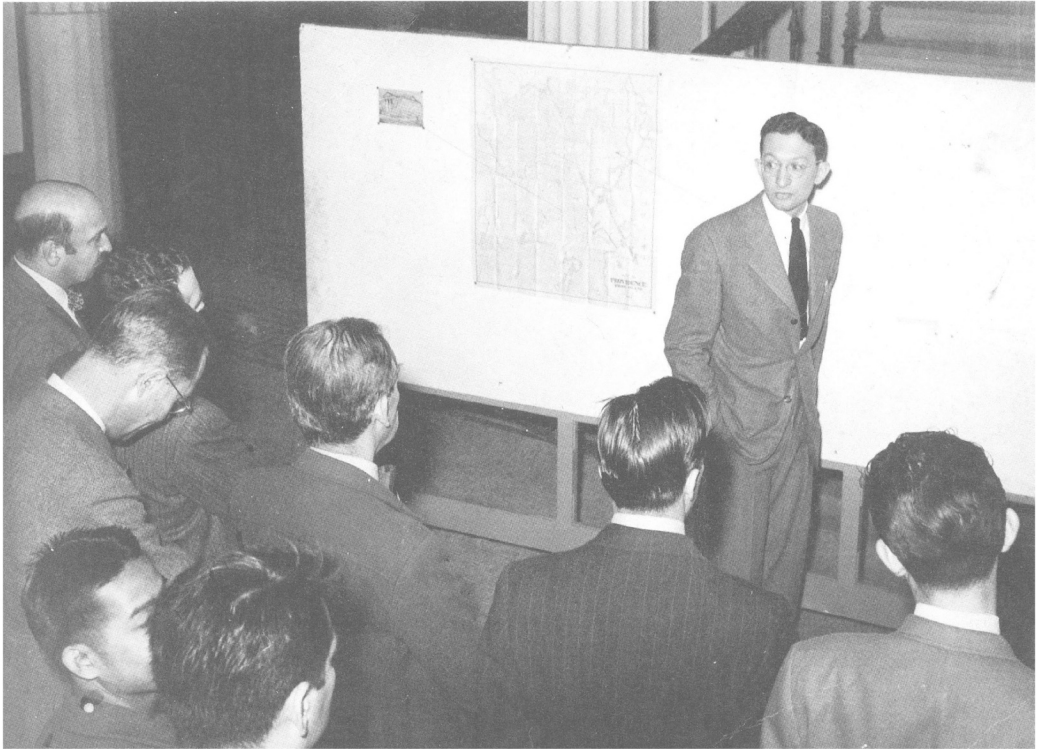


*John May*

Under Present Conditions  
Our Dullness Will Intensify



Ira Rakatansky,  
defending his B.Arch  
thesis, Harvard  
University, Graduate  
School of Design, 1946.

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## Under Present Conditions Our Dullness Will Intensify

The photograph is from 1946. It depicts an utterly novel event—the “open-jury” architectural examination—which in the ensuing postwar years came to rapidly replace the closed-door evaluations characteristic of the Beaux-Arts pedagogic model, and has since attained universal acceptance in our schools. Linger for a moment on the student’s face. Imagine that his bewildered expression is not the sort of momentary surprise we see so regularly today, provoked, as it often is, by the adolescent behavior of one’s supposed mentors, but rather belongs to a more generalized and sweeping shock, induced by the sudden realization that his objects now require legal counsel.

In the brief historical window between 1945 and 1960, an act of making that previously went by the name “architecture” was suddenly and universally transplanted to an institutional framework that took as its basis the American legal system. From that moment forward, that same framework has implicitly demanded that all architectural intellection adhere to a form of reasoning that is, at its base, *juridical*.

Within this new psychology, architectural reasoning repositions itself as the star witness at a mandatory trial of the architectural object, and the student-architect is forced into the position of a falsely sincere barrister, whose obligation it is to defend an object, no matter its innocence, its fragility, its poverty or its guilt. Every active impulse towards ambiguity, every instinct towards the inexpressible is displaced by a preemptive system of discursive evidentiary justification. And the entire interior history of architectural representation, marked by the dominance of hand-mechanical drawing within the space of orthographic representation, is upended, and placed in an ongoing crisis by forces external to itself.

If we step outside of ourselves for a moment, can we grasp the significance and consequences, for the future of our own thought, of this subtle but exhaustive institutional rearrangement?

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We are perched today on the precipice of a full disciplinary immersion within a family of technologies whose principle aim is to integrate and visualize hugely disparate sets of information, ranging from cost and risk analyses to biometric, economic and structural information. This integration will inevitably take place algorithmically—which is to say, *automatically*—and is now always predicated on the establishment of a generalized statistical-electrical reciprocity, in which the reality of lived life is continuously redescribed as discrete electrical signals: *data*. Within our equipmental assemblies, mathematical analysis and lived reality merge indistinguishably, ensuring that all architectural reasoning—knowingly or not—casts its foundations within the probabilistic and tacitly neopositivist metaphysics of the modern technosciences. Our equipment reasserts, in the depths of its details, the modern myth of an objective, knowable and naturalized nature.

Our contemporary condition is thus marked by a kind of servile lusting after the “data products” of those practices, which architects and urbanists know how to use, but know nothing about; products that are rapidly reorganizing our pursuits around specific managerial postures (environmental and computer-numerical) whose practical results are, historically speaking, unexplored at best. This logic—which reduces the rich mystery of existence down to a set of problems to be solved—conveys a style of reasoning that the design disciplines, in their present quandary, find irrefutable, and therefore utterly irresistible. Through our equipment, we internalize the manager’s naive opportunism, which repels critique not by direct refutation, but simply through absorption into a relentless teenage-patriarch smile; a confidence, without subtlety or fear, which once motivated dreams and ideals, but now swallows and digests them in silence.

Once upon a time in modernity, these practices and their conceptual products were uncontroversially situated within the eschatology of progress; it requires tremendous naiveté (or pathological cynicism) to situate them there today. Our equipment, it turns out, does not contain or transmit to us permanent or immutable facts regarding our environmental conditions, and certainly does not reveal substantial, extra-systemic causal relationships around which we might fashion technical remedies commensurate with our lived conditions. Nonetheless, our fascination with these practices and technical products has slipped over into a kind of intellectual eroticism without bounds, which today releases a thousand and one post-orthographic neopositivisms throughout our schools and profession; thermal-energetic mappings, biological and ecological models, climatological and demographic data, etc.—novel forms of representation whose efficacy is undeniable but whose consequences and assumptions remain unquestioned.

We might ask ourselves: why this submission to a set of disciplines with no more demonstrable access to truth than our own? Why our obsession, our lust? Where does it find its energy, its impulse?

These questions answer themselves. Architects do not, of course, simply enter their professional lives as fully formed subjects; they first pass through the white heat of the academy. Set against the backdrop of the open jury system, our contemporary technical and ethical demands produce, early on, an almost insatiable longing for the specific forms of evidence that now proliferate. What better foundation for one's legal case today than the irrefutable eyewitness account of equipment that by design makes visible the invisible, equipment that quantifies and calculates by sight, and which imparts a precision that apparently exceeds any subjective capacities?

When we speak today of architecture's *instrumentality*, we must include these two domains, the *juridical* and the *equipmental*, and recognize the extent to which the two have catalyzed and reproduced one another. The juridical constitutes an *orthographic leveling*, wherein discourse and drawing—two forms of orthographic reasoning with historically divergent attitudes towards the world—are given an insti-

tutional equivalence within the evaluative trial. The equipmental heralds an *orthographic erosion*, in which the very first statistical-electrical signalization of a hand-mechanical line (the re-presentation of architectural-orthographic representation as discrete electrical charges) also brought about the end of architecture's own historical sensibility, and its replacement by the perpetual present of real-time data.

In the immediate postwar period, the orthographic leveling of juridical thinking stimulated a remarkable response: from this seemingly mundane, even innocuous, institutional rearrangement emerged a style of reasoning we now know as postwar architectural theory. Forced to publicly justify their motives and actions before bodies of specious expertise, postwar architecture students exploited the tangencies and conduits within orthographic reasoning itself, setting up a temporary military encampment between writing and drawing—and thus between politics and form—from which they were able to defend and advance their objects. Decades later, that cunning representational outpost has been lost, displaced by the twinned banalities of juridical discipline and electrical automation. Nothing of its original platform for disobedience remains, and the sting of its ordinary pain has dissipated into an inoffensive, post-ironic cheekiness.

Regardless, what is clear is that during the postwar years (which is to say, very recently) the entire space of architectural representation was reconceived as a vast but rational evidentiary zone, a zone of explication and verbal obviousness, in which clarity and logical exposition are prized above all else; in which a kind of quasi-legal discursive representation is, under the cover of extra-architectural alibis, made continually commensurate with—or even elevated above—orthographic-architectural representation. In that subtle exchange, all of architecture and urbanism became, to some extent, a form of evidence-based design.

If, despite the severe realities of our lives, our profession is now entombed in a suffocating state of normalcy, then we should have the nerve to ask ourselves: To what extent is a now-universal pedagogical doctrine of thinking and making—the jury system—which effortlessly suspends within its structure the most divergent positions inherited from the postwar criti-

cal project, incapable of stimulating anything but the most mundane and responsible objects and thoughts? To what extent are we suffering under the weight of our own self-produced, self-reproducing *state of mind*, which reflexively drives a wedge between historical rumination and technical justification? And, conversely: to what extent has an entire configuration of theoretical counter-reasoning lost its fecundity, its capacity for energetic response and aggravated intellectual assault?

These questions are not simple matters of terminology or semantics, but rather confront the historical baggage now carried by an entire image of thought—one that has now been resituated in a field of technopolitical antagonisms for which it has no language.

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Postwar architectural theory was able to reproduce itself for two generations through a set of dynamic arguments that defined for them a series of codependent disciplinary relations. We, the postmillennials, have yet to fashion a language (and therefore, a disposition) commensurate with the realities we face. We have taken virtually no interest in understanding our evidentiary equipment, summoning it instead for use-value alone. Epistemologies and ontologies remain buried deep in the glossaries of our user's manuals. The oldest and richest philosophical questions are dismissed, glossed over, abandoned somewhere in the hollow din of technical routines. Somehow, unimaginably, architecture and urbanism remain insulated from the immensely productive pressures of their own technical history.

At the same time, we remain blindly committed to a thick system of institutional adjudication, which structures and canalizes thought not merely by publicly policing its content but more consequentially by setting every act of thinking within a general atmosphere of juridical exposition that is now taken as a kind of unquestionable, quasi-natural condition.

Under these conditions, a philological excavation of architectural instrumentality carries within it the possibility of attaining the richness and relevance that once belonged to the philosophies of language and life, before they

were eviscerated as living practices by Anglo-American analytical thought. In the absence of any viable, affirmative theoretical project—one capable of placing anthropotechnical curiosity in direct confrontation with modern technocratic certainty—the institutional zone of architectural logic will continue to be flooded with nonsensical evidence: autistic electrical signals incapable of grasping their immersion in the whole of life.

We do not know ourselves. We do not recognize that our thought is colonized in its deepest regions by equipmental processes whose features remain hidden to our outdated political indignation, or the degree to which our individuation now finds its form within a pedagogy in which the incurable incuriousness of the technocrat merges with the analytic ennu of the paralegal.

We have made for ourselves a dismal science, which in every instance demands of our ideas that they finalize themselves as solutions to a problem; that they terminate, close themselves in, prove themselves, eradicating the mystical, the unspeakable, eradicating every last trace of poetic ambiguity, until every connection between life and architecture is reduced to the inarguable sovereignties of naturalism and automatism.

If we are dull and banal, lacking eccentricity or fury, it is not because we are genetically prone to dull, banal, naive or ironic thoughts—about infrastructure, or energy efficiency, or housing, or parametrics, or robotics (the list goes on). *The juridical mnemotechnics of public reward and shame, coupled to the equipmental autotechnics of electrical signalization*: these are the genealogical preconditions for a domesticated, predictable, viscerally risk-averse generation, for whom the pseudo-politics of environmentalism claim moral superiority over the political autism of automation—both of which remain conveniently indistinguishable from the realpolitik of our private ambitions. Welcome to the New Millennium.