

Brad Cloepfil and the Democratic Ideal
T.H.J. Hodsdon

Brad Cloepfil attempts to map out what he describes as the “position” of his architectural endeavors. He starts with the question, “What can an act of architecture, the specific act of building, reveal about a place, an activity, a community...? Can the architecture provide an insight or reveal a characteristic or quality that we couldn’t see without the building?” This is uttered as a captain might announce the course for his ship before a voyage. The question asks more than the modest answer reveals. Although his answer is simple, there is more than meets the eye in Cloepfil’s architectural accomplishments. He describes his architecture as performing a mediating role between a specific site and the people who might occupy that site. In the case of the Maryhill Overlook Project, this mediation occurs between the observer and the tremendous and nearly overwhelming vistas of Washington State’s high steppe. Allied Works’ proposal for the Clifford Still Museum is described as mediating between the inhabitants of Denver and the vast skies of the Western Plains. Although this role of architecture is undoubtedly important (where would we be without a filter for our experiences with nature and our cities), it is perhaps not the most important thing that Cloepfil’s architecture begins to accomplish.

Much like the architecture of the Enlightenment, Cloepfil’s arguably subversive buildings have an unspoken social agenda. He only alludes to this in his discussion, but it is clear that his acts of mediation happen on the culturally collective scale, especially in his urban projects. His architecture seems designed to be inherently *inclusive*, in a way that each site had not allowed prior to his particular intervention.

This theme keeps recurring throughout Cloepfil’s presentation. The St. Louis Forum for Contemporary Art illustrates a desire to allow the public into a site that had hitherto been relatively inaccessible. More importantly, he tries to allow for a human access, both visual and physical, to a cultural phenomenon that is notoriously open to (although ironically typically not intended for) a privileged few – contemporary art¹. This theme repeats itself in the University of Michigan’s art museum Project Room in Detroit. Both the way the building is sited in relation to surrounding foot traffic and the transparent nature of the Project Room and the building’s interior circulation virtually propel people into the space, at least psychologically.

Two Columbus Circle’s theme of incisions is about the involvement of the public in the previously exclusive interior of the building, and the occupants with the world outside. He not only acknowledges the public’s visual prerogative to the interior a private urban structure, but practically insists upon it (although some would argue if he was indeed successful in his goal or not).

¹ Libby, Brian (2002-01-02). "[Interview with an Emerging Architect](#)". *Architecture Week*. Retrieved on March 01, 2008.

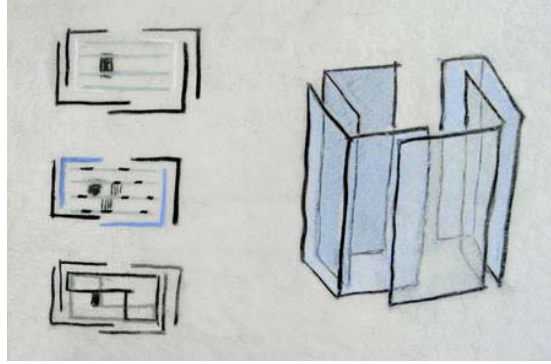
Perhaps the most overt suggestion of the inclusive and accessible responsibility that most of Cloepfil's buildings assume is found in the Emporis Building, or Wieden+Kennedy Advertising Agency in Portland, Oregon. This is a private building, but both the client's program and Cloepfil's idealism have allowed the gutted center of the old warehouse to become something of a public auditorium. One citizen of Portland says: "It sounds like a great quasi-public amenity. There is such a great tradition of private auditoriums and ballrooms in PDX from the early 20th century- it's nice to see [the Weiden+Kennedy lobby] adding to the new tradition [of quasi-public spaces]. Love those hidden voids all over town. It makes for a great tour of the city- the beautiful guts of PDX."² Cloepfil expresses pride that the auditorium portion of this remodeled building has become a cherished gathering- and trading-place of ideas. It is this intrusion of the public entitlement into the private realm that so poignantly illustrates Brad Cloepfil's almost subversive agenda, a kind of 'spatial egalitarianism'.



Allied Works Architecture, Wieden+Kennedy Advertising Agency, level 4 and atrium, penthouse structure above. This photo shows the insistence of Cloepfil's public spaces, and how his boundaries of public and private start to blur as he acknowledges our mutual ownership of cityscapes. (Photo: Sally Schoolmaster.)

Certain architecture of the Enlightenment was a symbolic type, drawing from classical precedents in order to represent and glorify the ideals of democracy. Cloepfil presents us with yet another interpretation of 'democratic' architecture – his own brand of inclusiveness that not only mediates between the individual and the site, but also between the individual and typically inaccessible places and layers. Cloepfil's initial concept sketches are perhaps most telling. His walls invariably originate as a series of overlapping planes that talk about two things: interconnectedness and permeability.

² <http://www.portlandspaces.net/blog/>



Concept drawing for Seattle Art Museum, 2003

What else describes a democratic society better than one that recognizes its own interconnectedness, and encourages infiltration in its process through the permeability of government by its public? Our cities would do well to consider Brad Cloepfil and Allied Works in the design of future civic buildings. Especially if such a building could, as Cloepfil envisions, “...shift your perception in a way that allows you to be open to new experiences.” He has the potential to infuse such structures with the sense of transparency and inclusiveness that is crucial to both democratic architecture, culture, and most important: thought.