

THE TENT,

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In loving memory of my father,
Adam Berler (1946-2013).

The world is a sphere, whose periphery is everywhere and whose center is nowhere. There is no “exterior” to dump the stuff we don’t want. Everywhere is somewhere and no place is nowhere. We have been camping on this field for as long as we can remember and it seems that we are becoming worse and worse at it. Maybe it’s just an illusion, or maybe we have been bad all along. There is little sense in drawing lines in the sand. Origin stories only make sense when they are told and futures are always things of the present. We have never quit the anthropological matrix; we have never had facts, only concerns. So what now?

Within our complex networks or spheres of survival, architecture seems reliably entrusted with the design of storage. The box for life is the most inclusive way in which we can define the scope of architectural production. If through architecture we store, and through stor- age we mediate (now) and not idealize (“forever”), the concerns of architecture can be broken down to three kinds, contained within each other. First, it is asked to defend a perimeter, always wider than its own footprint, making surface available. Secondly, it sets up an envelope, providing for a margin of climatic conditions, reliable resistance to gravity and a certain access to energy. Finally and most importantly, it accommodates things, the many fragile life-supports we need.

In a mythical tale of “naked” human individuals, hateful of hybrids and concerned only with Nature and each other, architecture loses sense because there is no mediation for it to perform. However, just like there are no naked astronauts, there are no naked humans, so mediation is performed anyway, at all times. Through the widespread myth of global nakedness, mediation escapes collective concern and becomes an accidental by-product. Thus, we look constantly the wrong way and create an unthinkable and unworkable world of hybrids behind our backs. In architecture, we produce 25-year buildings while thinking that we build forever. We deal with leaks, bill- boards and noisy roads while longing for sunshine, meaning and smiling children. We produce assemblages with glass wool, gaffer tape and glue, while trying to discuss with bricks. We make forms, just like we always have, while thinking we are reinventing life. We hope for temples, anywhere and everywhere but all we can build are tents, and temples are also tents themselves.

In the three workings, perimeter, envelope and things, the tent is the best axiom we can have. Neither discourse nor symbol, neither commodity nor invention, neither archetype nor prototype, the tent ought to be a type; a living idea for building that stems from both tradition and technology. A type is not about direct imitation but about “the idea of an element, which must itself serve as a rule” as Quatremere put it. By that definition, the tent is not a temporary structure made out of fabric. It is rather a gradient of attitudes sug- gesting possible rules.

Thus, the tent is an architecture that would implement the “North Face” trekker’s tent idea of compromise between the permanence of the rough ground and the quick, streamlined, high-tech object. It is a building that would work with the tipi’s light-footed dignity and likewise would aspire to achieve civility through system. It is a form that would employ the yurt proposal of the empty interior. It is a structure based on the Bedouin principle of the horizontal envelope, the pattern and carpet idea of roof and ground. It is a gathering space that would test the circus tent’s deployable, reversible strategy for the big hall. It is a construction that would use the open-air cinema’s directness and opportunism. It is an apparatus that, like a piece of tarp or a fireplace, can bring things together in the open.

Outside of metaphors, it is the contention here that the architectural attitude of the tent has been a hidden, albeit constant and consis- tent source of good architecture. From Scamozzi to Shinohara, from Poccianti to Hannes Meyer, from Labrouste to Lacaton & Vassal, from Sinan to Bunshaft, from Schinkel to Hollein, a tent canon has been developing throughout radically careful practice.

This architectural culture of mediation is the central concern of the project hereby; not the program(s) nor the site(s). Those were cho- sen as an appropriate side story, meant to help with testing the theoretical contention. The bad news is that a theory cannot become fully functional overnight. Much like a building, it needs to be carefully assembled from an array of materials, each providing for a spe- cific performance. The good news is that, with this Tent 00, the ground is broken.