



Liberation or straitjacket?

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his issue of Archis is an experiment. The question is, what would happen if art, design and architecture had to get by without Concept – without that familiar but so very volatile

device that has heaped top talents with fame, that has succeeded in hoodwinking the public, that has saved reviewers from the breadline and that has helped conquer the market; or how might they get by not entirely without concepts but without the unquestioned status of the concept? What, in other words, would remain of the creative spirit if it had to survive without the automatism of this era's artistic alibi?

How often hasn't the concept been put forward as the part that really matters, as the part that comprises the essence of the design, that does the work of appealing to people intellectually and spiritually, and that gives the pragmatic activity its legitimacy? It is a phenomenon we have known since Plato, who discerned a world of ideas behind the world of material things where true value was to be sought. But this phenomenon has taken on a new significance in the last hundred years. There is no longer a world behind immediate reality, but a world instead of immediate reality. Ever since Duchamp put his bicycle wheel in a museum, we have stopped looking at art as a thing and instead, predominantly, as an intention. It is that intention that ostensibly merits our research, appreciation and discussion. The object is merely the pretext. The intention has moreover displaced the Platonic idea of an underlying reality in favour of an alternative reality. Reality here becomes an option. Whereas Plato upholds the idea of an ultimate, exclusive truth, today concepts can be about anything. Intentions, as laid down in concepts, are arbitrary on principle. The reality concerned is still an underlying one, but it is no longer absolute; it is instead a personal choice. This form of artistic legitimation is thus immediately and overwhelmingly vulnerable to disinterest, obsolescence and other forms of irrelevance.

The vulnerability is now becoming more and more visible. Artistic legitimacy is subject to a barrage of questioning from all quarters. People are once more spontaneously asking, 'what's the point?' Those who dish out the subsidies want to know what function the work fulfils. The market is prepared to pay only for results. The press is eager to puncture any kind of intellectual or artistic claim that cannot be backed by hard figures proving its success. Gradually, it is becoming apparent that to postulate an 'interesting concept' is no longer a forceful argument but evidence of an incapacity to recognize the social dynamic.

This issue gives space to numerous key representatives of cultural life, who provide an account of their own struggles with this shift of outlook. Archis showcases a number of designs that treat

this question as more than just a theoretical dilemma, for it has engendered new work. And for the occasion, Archis too has pared its concept to the bare bones.

This issue was produced in collaboration with PremSela, Dutch design foundation. PremSela organises activities to stimulate reflection on assumptions, presuppositions and possible biases in the design process.

