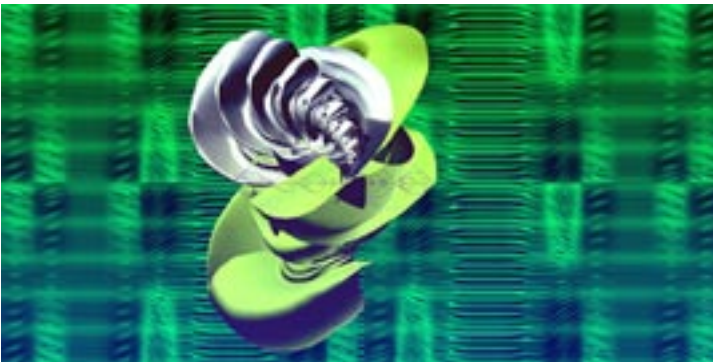




mods and rockers: who is cleaner?

schmods and mockers

Being an architect in what the media has glibly dubbed the “digital age,” it sometimes feels like we roam in packs—gangs of architects subscribing to very specific methodologies to generate form on the one hand and space on the other. I’m reminded of Claude Levi-Strauss’ *Savage Mind*, in which he described the sociology of games as a mode of differentiation similar to that of early human tribes that competed with and married one another to ensure a diverse genetic pool for the survival of each (think of the Aztec game of Tlachtli, in which the losers would be killed). Architectural discourse today seems to be degenerating into bickering over software programs and modelling techniques (status symbols) that differentiate each group and ensure survival in a market-driven economy. One person’s nub-infested universe contrasts sharply with say, another person’s snow-blind field of foam-core. But, like a game or a gang, are the differences real or imaginary?



above: “Genetic Space” by Karl Chu on Columbia University’s website.

right: Kanazawa Museum model study, SANAA



Do the myriad symbols of differentiation actually have meaning to the discourse of design practice or are they chimera intended to convey to other tribes (like developers and museum curators) that one side is more virile than the other or, at least, less prone to disease? Let’s consider some analogic evidence offered by one “historic” struggle for differentiation: the battle for cool between Britain’s mods and rockers.

According to an online encyclopedia, “the mods and the rockers were two British youth movements of the early 1960s. Gangs of mods and rockers fighting in 1964 sparked a moral panic about British youth....The rockers adopted a macho biker gang image tending to wear such clothes as black leather jackets. The mods adopted a pose of scooter-driving ‘sophistication.’ It was believed that mods were cleaner and tidier than rockers. They often wore colourful clothes considered outrageous by the standards of the time. In Britain in the 1960s by no means all teenage boys could afford a motorbike or a motor scooter. These bikes/scooters were a status symbol perhaps equivalent to a car today.” Consider young architects today: between form and space (function being a long lost cousin of the discourse, a sort of “flapper” to our mods and rockers), lies an architectural fashion battlefield, strewn with bad hair, obsolete software, impractical vehicles and of course, ostentatious eyewear.



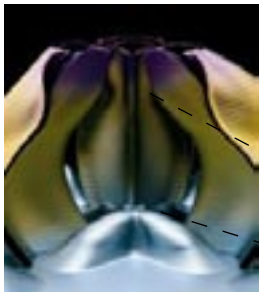
far left: Mme Pompadour, portrait by Francois Boucher, 1757



left: hair arranging diagram, c. 1909

HAIR

Starting with Mme Pompadour herself, the pompadour has been a bold fashion statement since the rococco period (here she is painted in portrait around 1745). She will be our patron saint of all rockers. Of course, it takes courage to be a trendsetter in such a visible way, though the risk of becoming a self-caricature looms heavily. Without this kind of brazen individualism, however, there is no James Dean hair and no Greg Lynn teapot.



far left: *teapot* for Alessi, Greg Lynn, 2003.

left: *Torn Sweater*, portrait of James Dean by Roy Schatt, 1954.



The problem lies, as it did in the 60's, with the conformity of non-conformity. Indeed, in architecture today, those most in danger of becoming self-caricatural deal heavily in the currency of form. As visual media propagate images of highly formal work, architecture becomes increasingly identified with it's visuo-iconic exchange value and through commodification is transformed into "installation" (a linguistic abuse which does a great disservice to actual installation art). Furthermore, as noted in the New York Times this summer, architects are increasingly exposing themselves to lawsuits for alleged "architectural plagiarism." True plagiarism of architecture's intellectual property is in fact impossible, involving as it does, site specific factors and other elements that are hard to duplicate; but one might well contend that formal plagiarsim is possible. The fact that the suit against David Childs' Freedom Tower has been allowed to proceed is evidence of a larger cultural mutation towards a reading of architecture in purely formal terms.



far left: scene from *Leningrad Cowboys*, film by Aki Kaurismaki, 1989.

left: *Sur* at PS1, by Xefirotarch, 2005.



From pompadour then, we move on to the bowl cut. This hairstyle has a much less glamorous history, having “first become popular during the Great Depression as an easy way to cut a boy’s hair.” Both in terms of its utilitarian methodology (place bowl on head, cut) and lack of stylin’, the bowl cut is an apt metaphor for architecture that eschews formal preoccupations of ornament and affect, preoccupied as it is with elevators, “space” and gravity. And yet, the bowl cut too became a “style,” just like “mid-century modern” became a new real estate term. How did this happen?



far left: anon., or is it my mom?
 left: Twiggy
 below left: The Small Faces
 below right and bottom left: Arpel residence in *Mon Oncle*, film by Jacques Tati



By the time *Quadrophenia* was released in 1979, the whole mod/rocker opposition had layered back over itself in a wave of post-60’s nostalgia. Although *The Who* is really the premier mod band, it was the proliferation of the music and style through groups such as the *Small Faces* that really declared a new trend. Moving beyond the bowl cut, a style evolved that was at times called the “Beatle haircut” but which I prefer to call “square hair.” Square hair is actually a long bowl cut that, in fact, cannot be cut using a bowl at all and does require a trip to the barber or coiffeur and is therefore a middle class contrivance somewhere along the lines of Tati’s modern residence in the film *Mon Oncle*. Meticulously composed and choreographed, one fears that Madame Arpel might wander out at any moment and turn on the fish fountain.



The conflict between the mods and the rockers was the butt of a joke in The Beatles' first film *A Hard Day's Night*. In the press conference scene, a reporter asks Ringo, 'Are you a mod or a rocker?', to which he replies 'I'm a mocker.'" It is not surprising that this poppy witticism came from the stealth Beatle, the one that was ignored—the drummer, as it were. While the other band members carried the burden of defining the band's popular image, differentiating the fab four from say, the Kinks or the Strawberry Alarm Clock, the drummer could really just sit in back and play. This is an envious position, and one that many architects might naturally prefer. To be unburdened by the need to differentiate one's "polemic" could be a relief in a profession struggling to define its very utility to the consumer-public.

BIKES

Besides haircuts, mods and rockers differentiated themselves by the bikes they rode. Rockers rode motorcycles, full of muscle, horsepower and speed. Mods rode scooters, full of agility, comfort and *brand*. So what can be said about the *Furnicycle* by Atelier Bow Wow? It is neither hog nor scooter, bike nor chair, but rather a kind of hybrid vehicle patched together from impetuous "needs" with neither formal intention nor elegant functionality. The Furnicycle is a vehicle for mockers.

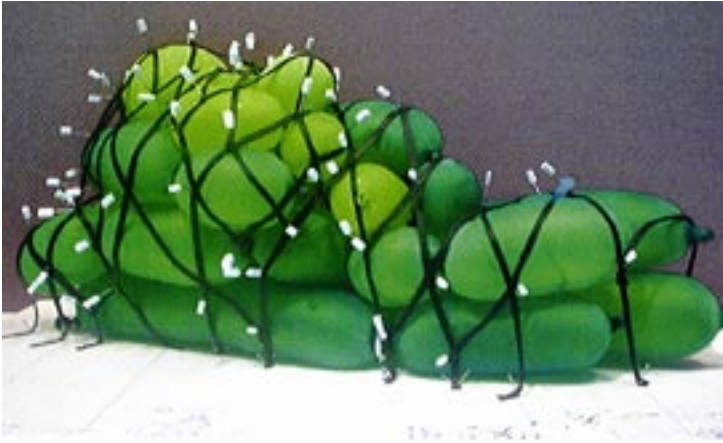


hog, scooter, furnicycle



At dinner the other night, while David Erdman of the firm servo explained to me how to get a bat out of an apartment in Venice, Italy (apparently, one should coolly trap it under a decorative pot), this piece on mods and rockers came up and I discovered that servo had recently written a proposal for a competition in which they described something I heard as “schmod,” (turns out it was “chmōd” with a long ō). Phonetic intuition should never be ignored, however, nor should strange coincidences. And so, here are today’s *schmods* and *mockers*;

SCHMODS



Schmods include NOX, R&Sie and of course, servo. This is form a la mode—always busy, always exploring, always seeking the shortest path, the longest span. It’s EZ-Form, making the fastest connection, the seamless transition. Form in this context is a verb (to quote Buckminster Fuller). The program diagram, the technological skin, the webnet structure—all make an appearance in a design process ostensibly unconcerned with formal outcome but somehow it always looks like its own *dernier cri*. It’s wavy hair that is blown out with intense heat to resemble Jennifer Aniston.

MOCKERS



Mockers include SANAA, MVRDV and the aforementioned Atelier Bow Wow. Diagram is not actually king, but more of a petulant despot. Form is completely irrelevant to these practices which have more in common with the choreographed space of Tativille than the sober modernism of Unité d'Habitation. This work exposes the diagram as the hypochondriac that it is, yet affords the freedom of movement and dwelling promised by modernism but rarely delivered. Space is a game of silly adjacencies and farcical events. Details are painstakingly concealed so as not to give the secret away. Mockers once had long hair that has been dramatically shorn to look like Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby* (*after* she becomes pregnant with Satan and to piss off Frank Sinatra).



In the final analysis, the insularity of our tribe becomes more and more hysterical and its discourse increasingly desperate. My wealthy grandfather, a retired drummer, screenwriter and all-around entertainment opportunist, suggested that I hire an “agent” in order to obtain architectural commissions. The very absurdity of the suggestion gave me pause. My mother talks about the importance of satisfying “customers” as if I sold cars (as she once did), which just makes me angry, because, like most architects, I am looking for the “customers” that satisfy me. In a country where ninety-five percent of the population answers affirmatively to their love of architecture with the statement that a) they almost became one and b) they appreciate the modern architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright (—or is it that other Frank something?), one wonders what cause is served by fracturing the profession into increasingly diaphanous slivers of differentiation. Seen from the outside, these discussions of form, space, method and diagram must seem truly incomprehensible. If a broader public were resuscitated beyond the cultural plague of nostalgia and its addiction to cheap and plentiful space, the narcissistic preening of architects in front of each other might actually spread into popular discourse at large and become an interesting cultural discussion. But for now, even if Marie was a little bit country and Donny a little bit rock ‘n roll, will we ever remember them as anything but Osmonds? It’s a lesson worth learning from.

