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Beyond Direction and Control: Irrational Grids as Architectural Design Method

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Abstract

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This paper proposes the possibility of the grid system to operate irrationally in producing architectural space. This proposition challenges the rational-functionalist paradigm that has dominated the use of grid in modern architecture. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of *détournement*, the study conducts a qualitative comparative analysis of three architectural case studies: Hejduk's Bye House, Tschumi's Parc de la Villette, and MVRDV's Pavilion at Expo 2000. The study identifies criteria of irrationality, comprising of ambiguity, separation, non-predetermined function, and diversity. Based on such criteria, the research demonstrates how irrational grid systems do not constitute as design failure but represent a productive alternative design methodology. These findings suggest that there are some transformations that occur when the grid is *détourned*. Such transformations exist when the design purpose shifts from control to disruption, when uselessness is reframed as a generative spatial strategy, and when architectural meaning shifts from functional prescription to human interpretation. Thus, the paper contributes by expanding the understanding and application of grid as the basis of design method, moving beyond functionalist perspectives of architecture.

Keywords: Irrational Grid; *Détournement*; Methodology; Ambiguity; Functionalism.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Problem with Rationality

This study proposes the irrational utilization of grid as the basis of a productive design methodology. Since its emergence in the early twentieth century, modern architecture has operated under the domination of rationalism. This system, according to Till (1996), has dominated architectural practice through the systematic arrangement of knowledge. Yet, beneath this legacy, Blake (1977) argues that modern architecture's steadfastness to functional purity had resulted in the production of an environment as mechanistic and alienating as the factories its advocates claimed to oppose. The metaphoric made famous by Le Corbusier (1986) that a house is 'a machine for living in,' reveals the reductive logic at the heart of modernism that space is a vessel, and thus the vessel must be fit for purpose.

Central to this rational and reductive logic is the use of architectural grid. In its conventional use, the grid functions as a geometric tool that organizes structural systems, coordinates programmatic zoning, and establishes hierarchical relationships between spaces (Ching, 2015). Grant (2018) has described the grid as fundamentally a 'device of control'. This means, it does not merely reflect rational order but actively produces it, distributing authority across space and regulating the movements and the behaviors of its occupants. The modernist grid encodes a specific conception of the human subject: rational, predictable, and governable. It presupposes that function precedes form, that movement can be optimized, and that architectural experience should be self-evident (Proto, 2020). Within the modernist discourse, the grid is typically treated as a mere tool to create architectural space, not a conceptual idea. This statement found its similarity with how modularity in architectural discourse has been confined to a pattern of continuous repetition, despite its potential to operate as a contextual design response that integrates both pattern and contextual forces (Redyantanu & Sunaryo, 2024). That is why when Mies van der Rohe described his buildings in terms of organization, clarity, and economy 'wide workrooms, easy to oversee' (Curtis, 1983, p. 124), he was not simply describing geometry. He was inscribing a social and aesthetic vision into stone and glass.

The rational and reductive use of architectural grid in modernist design method reflect Ingraham (2023) notes on the normality of paradigm in architectural design, where its alternatives such as irrationality appear as failures. Yet the history of architecture itself might provides little evidence that the 'irrational' or in other words the ambiguous, the fragmentary, the deliberately inefficient, has generated some of the most experientially compelling spatial environments of the twentieth century. Architects including John Hejduk, Bernard Tschumi, and the Dutch firm MVRDV have all, in different ways, subjected the grid to a conceptual *détournement* (Burch, 1995; Giovannini, 2021; Story, 2020). A deliberate misreading or subversion of its conventional functions that opens it to previously unexplored spatial possibilities. Despite

the significance of these practices, the theoretical literature has been slow to articulate a coherent framework for what such détourned grid systems are doing, how they work, and what they contribute to architectural knowledge.

1.2 Positioning the Rational and Irrational Debate In Architecture

The attempt of theorizing irrationality in architecture is inhibited by the fear of its meaning as architectural failure. Heatherwick (2023) has observed that the framing of complexity, messiness, and spatial uncertainty in contemporary architectural culture is not a judgment of universal validity but a historically specific one. This judgement, he argues, produced by one or more authorities. Thus, when a building is described as 'irrational,' it simply means that the building does not conform to the priorities of modernist tradition. A tradition that has elevated to the status of universal criteria.

The argument of irrationality is also demonstrated by the Situationist tradition, particularly in the work of Asger Jorn from 1957-1972, who critique the modernist architect who treats the grid as a neutral instrument of self-expression as the 'pure creator' (Burch, 1995, p. 12). For Jorn such creativity is regressive and reductive to the designer's own subjectivity, excluding the participation of those who inhabit the environments. Jorn practiced détournement—or distortion in French—in his Modifications painting series, where he painted over a found painting, creating new meanings. In doing so, it can be claimed that the objective world resists the sovereign will of the creator, and that this resistance is precisely where new meaning is made (Burch, 1995; Shadkar, 2024). Applied to the field of architectural design, détournement suggests a potentially different relationship between the architect and the grid. Rather than using the grid as a transparent tool for projecting a functional program, détournement thus potentially treats the grid as an already-meaningful object; whose use in architectural design can be consciously disrupted, reversed, or multiplied.

The Hubbe House, one of Mies van der Rohe's unbuilt residential projects, provides the rational example of the use of grid. In this project, the grid performs its conventional modernist functions with exemplary clarity. The floor plan organizes domestic space into a clear hierarchy of zones. Open communal space at the top of the plan, a shared living area adjacent, and distinctly differentiated service spaces (kitchen to the left, office and toilet to the right) that are legible at a glance. The structural grid aligns with and reinforces this spatial hierarchy, producing a floor plan in which every element occupies a position determined by functional logic and structural necessity.

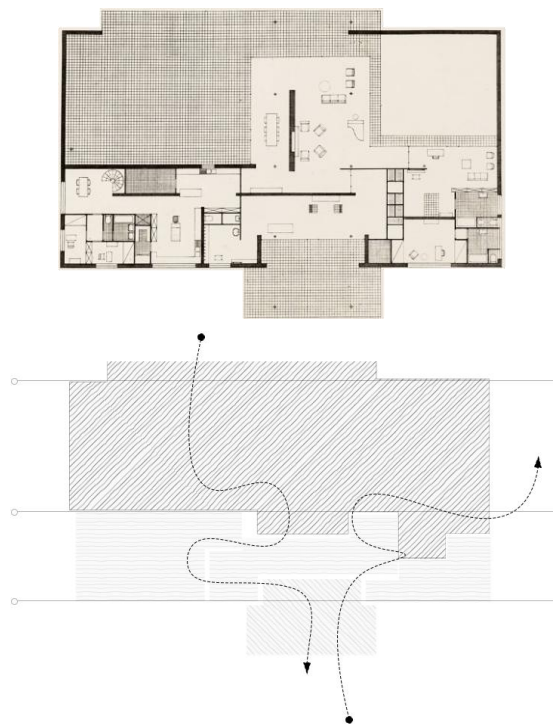


Figure 1. Hubbe House.

When a grid pattern is superimposed over the Hubbe House floor plan and calibrated to the functional zones, it reveals a regular, orthogonal structure in which spatial boundaries coincide precisely with structural lines. There is no ambiguity about where one zone ends and another begins; no uncertainty about how to move through the building; no spatial condition that exceeds its programmatic designation. The grid, in this case, is a device of total spatial legibility.

Based on the paradigm of modernist architecture discussed above, it can be concluded that the grid is organized around four core principles. The first is clarity: spatial relationships must be immediately legible and structurally transparent. The grid produces spatial hierarchies that guide occupants through a building without ambiguity or uncertainty. Mies van der Rohe articulated this aspiration explicitly, describing his buildings in terms of 'organization, clarity, and economy' (Curtis, 1983, p. 124), and his projects consistently translate this aspiration into architectural form through the use of clean structural lines, minimal ornamentation, and legible spatial sequences. The second principle is connection: the grid enables efficient circulation, linking programmatic zones in ways that minimize friction and maximize the smooth flow of movement through the building.

The third principle is function: the grid is organized around a predetermined program that assigns specific uses to specific spaces or more famously known as form follows function (Sullivan, 1896). The fourth principle is unity: a coherent design language must be maintained across all architectural elements, ensuring that form, colour, material, and structure speak with a single voice (Curtis, 1983). Gropius, a central figure of the Modern Movement, was particularly insistent on this point, arguing that unity of form and colour was essential for architecture to serve the demands of public life (Curtis, 1983). In contrast, the study proposes that irrational grid systems are characterized by the systematic inversion of each of these principles. In place of clarity, irrational grids produce ambiguity: spatial relationships resist singular interpretation, and the reading of space is deliberately complicated (Story, 2020). In place of connection, they produce separation: circulation is made inefficient, and movement through the building becomes an experience of disjunction rather than continuity (Story, 2020). In place of function (as a design prescription), they substitute event, habit, transgression, or interpretive act as the organizing principle of space (Tschumi, 1994). And in place of unity, they generate diversity: heterogeneous spatial conditions coexist without hierarchical integration, allowing radically different spatial systems to occupy the same architectural field (Comaroff and Ong, 2013). The study therefore argues that applying irrationality in architectural use of grid through distortion may create new pattern.

The study pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it aims to revisit the use of architectural grid as something more than a neutral instrument, demonstrating how its *détournement* can generate spatial conditions that challenge functionalist logic. Second, it shows the irrationalist understanding and application of grid in design works. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the methodology, describing the case study selection rationale and the four analytical criteria derived from the inversion of modernist grid logic. Section 3 presents the results of the comparative case study analysis, moving from the rational baseline initially established by Mies van der Rohe by elaborating the three instances of *détourned* grid practice. Section 4 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, identifying three transformations that characterize the shift from rational to irrational design paradigms. Section 5 concludes by summarizing the paper's principal contributions and identifying directions for future research.

2. Research Approach and Case Study Selection

This study adopts a qualitative comparative analysis methodology, examining three architectural case studies that represent distinct positions within the spectrum from rational to irrational grid-based design. The selection of case studies was chosen because it exemplifies, in a particularly clear and theoretically significant way, either the rational-functionalist paradigm or a specific mode of grid *détournement*. The comparative structure of the analysis allows patterns of transformation to be identified across cases, rather than within any single project.

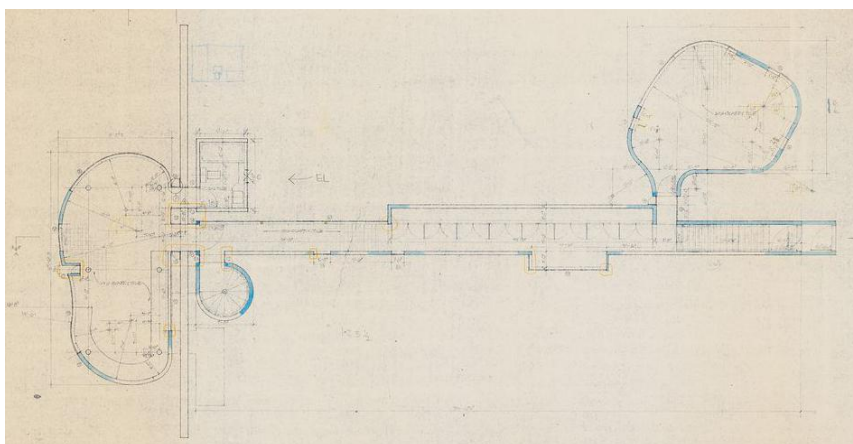
The decision to focus on the grid-based design systems, rather than on architectural irrationality more broadly, is deliberate. The grid is the foundational organizational device of modernist architecture. Thus its theoretical centrality makes it an ideal site at which to examine the tension between rational and irrational design logics. By holding the grid constant as the unit of analysis while varying the mode of its use, the study is able to isolate the specific conceptual transformations that accompany the shift from rational to irrational design paradigms.

The case studies were selected from a broader field of architects and projects known for grid experimentation, on the basis of their theoretical significance, the availability of documentary and scholarly evidence, and their capacity to represent the full range of the analytical criteria proposed below. The selection does not claim to be comprehensive; rather, it aims to be representative of the key conceptual positions available within the irrational design tradition. The selection will be analysed through tracing of program usage, floor levels, and human movement.

3. Results

3.1 Separation and Ambiguity as Spatial Condition

It can be argued that John Hejduk's works represents the first and most fundamental form of grid *détournement*: the transformation of the grid from an instrument of spatial clarity into a generator of spatial ambiguity. Unlike Mies, his works refuses to allow the grid to resolve the spatial relationships it organizes. The arrangement of rooms in Bye House produces an architecture that appears, simultaneously, connected and also disconnected. In addition, the grid is also used to enforce extreme spatial separation. In this project, the architectural plan is organized around elongated corridors that divide the building into isolated spatial zones. Rather than connecting these zones into a unified spatial hierarchy, as modernist planning principles would demand, the corridors function as barriers, enforcing the experience of disjunction between inside and outside, between adjacent zones, and between the different floors of the building.



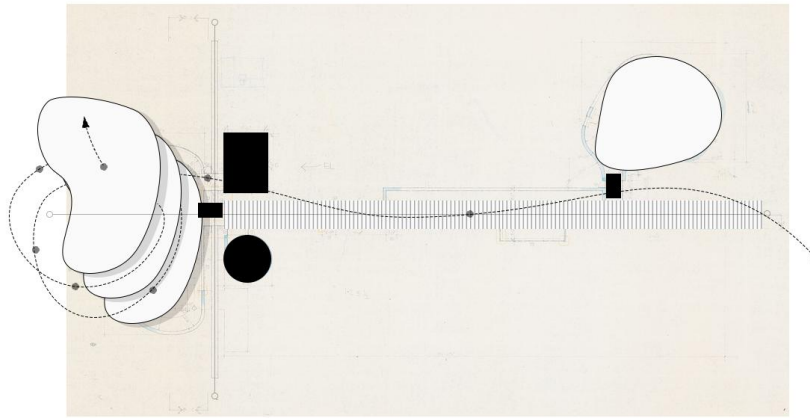


Figure 2. Bye House.

Vertical organization reinforces individual functions that are assigned to separate floors rather than being integrated within a single spatial hierarchy (Story, 2020). From the perspective of modernist planning this arrangement is precisely what Blake (1977) would have called a fiasco. But this verdict depends entirely on accepting the modernist criteria of success and failure as universal, which, as the theoretical framework of this paper argues, is precisely what cannot be taken for granted. What Hejduk was pursuing in the Bye House was not organizational efficiency but temporal and phenomenological experience (Pallasmaa, 2012; Story, 2020). The elongated corridors were designed to make occupants experience the passage of time as they traversed them. A form of spatial duration that is entirely absent from the instantaneous, optimized circulation paths of modernist planning. The separated zones were intended to heighten the phenomenological contrast between interior and exterior space, so that the transition between them would register as a meaningful event rather than a seamless functional connection. As Hejduk stated, the goal was for the human being to become 'an element of an internal system of organisms' (Hejduk, 1985). The Bye House thus addresses primarily the criteria of separation and non-predetermined function, while also gesturing toward the ambiguity criterion through its refusal to make spatial relationships immediately legible (Almaç, 2023). The project's critical contribution to the theoretical framework is its demonstration that inefficiency need not be evaluated as failure. It may instead constitute the very medium through which architectural experience is produced.

3.4 Event, Movement, and Freedom

Bernard Tschumi's Parc de la Villette represents another mode of grid détournement. Unlike the spatial ambiguity that was brought by Hejduk, Tschumi's project emphasizes on the relationship between architecture and event. Tschumi's design for the park is organized around three independent systems which are points, lines, and surfaces. All three systems are superimposed over each other without hierarchical integration. The point system consists of red metal follies distributed across the park's field. These follies do not have a predetermined function. They mark points in space at which events can occur, encounters can take place and activities can happen.

Tschumi's theoretical position, developed in his book *Architecture and Disjunction* (1994), is that modernism treat architecture as an instrument of behavioural control. In his analysis, the organization of space according to predetermined functional programs reduces human behaviour to something that can be anticipated, rationalized, and managed. The result is an architecture of somewhat static. It is so static that spaces become a prescription that closing the possibility of unexpected or even spontaneous event. This is why he proposes an architecture of event. A spatial framework that does not dictate how the occupants will behave but creates the conditions within which a multiplicity of behaviours can emerge. A writer may construct the formal structures of a narrative but the spatial and the atmosphere that the narrative produces can only be experienced through the sequential movements of reading (Tschumi, 1994; Tally, 2013). Architecture, therefore, can only be experienced through movement, through the act of sauntering, interacting, and discovering (Zumthor, 2006). Such non-linear experience of space resonates with how spatial narratives can be re-read, generating multiple narrative possibilities and open-ended interpretations rather than a single chronological reading (Gunawan, 2023). Thus, La Villette scores most strongly on non-predetermined function and diversity. The follies within the grid resist programmatic designation by design and their function is precisely to be functionless in the modernist paradigm.

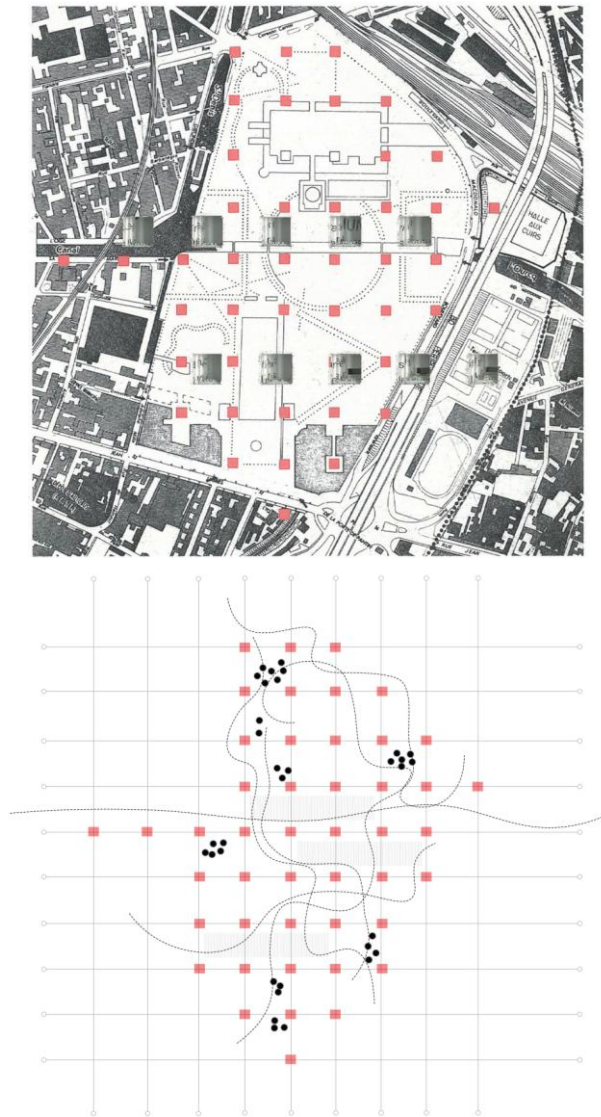


Figure 3. Parc De La Villette.

3.5 Diversity and the Paradox of Coherence

The third case study, MVRDV's German Pavilion for the Hannover Expo 2000, addresses the fourth criterion of irrational design which is unity. Specifically saying, in its most literal and provocative architectural form. The pavilion stacks seven floors of radically different spatial conditions, representing a distinct functions such as dunes, greenhouses, pot deck, forest, rain forest, wind, and open sky. Such vertical layering of heterogeneous conditions operates through the principle of interposition, where the arrangement of stacked layers becomes the very mechanism that produces three-dimensional spatial experience from otherwise flat planes (Muvida et al., 2023). In addition, these floor levels do not constitute a unified architectural language in the modernist paradigm as the form, material, and atmospheric differences are extremely diversified, creating a rejection towards the need of coherence (Comaroff and Ong, 2013).

The rejection of coherence can also be seen in the way floors of the pavilion do not share a common formal language, material palette, or a unified structures. Such rejection challenges Gropius's insistence on 'unity of form and colour' as the mark of architecture appropriate for public life (Curtis, 1983). However, it is precisely due to this incoherence that Comaroff and Ong (2013) identify as the project's most significant contribution. The pavilion demonstrates that what appears as disjunction at the level of individual floors can also nevertheless produce a coherent spatial experience at the level of the building as a whole. A repeated disjunction, in their formulation, could at the end create a certain coherence ; leading to a paradox that challenges the modernist assumption that unity must be imposed through a controlling design language in order for architecture to achieve wholeness.

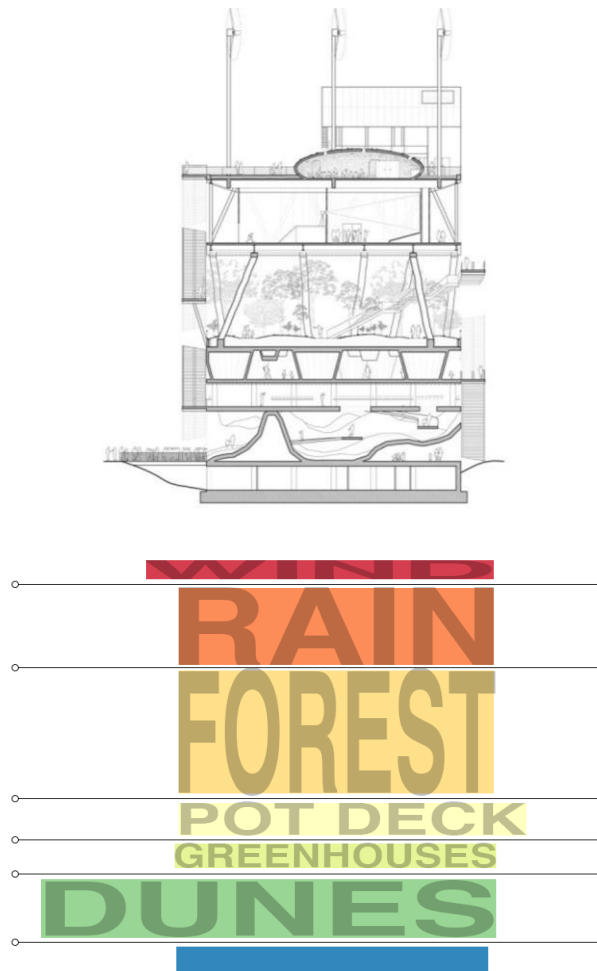


Figure 4. German Pavillion.

This paradox has important implications for the theoretical framework of present study. It suggests that diversity and unity are not mutually exclusive. Such position will understand architecture as a projection of multiplicities, where multi-layered meanings and heterogeneous spatial operations expand the architecture field beyond a fixed and conclusive entity (Paramita, 2022). An architecture of radical heterogeneity can achieve its own form of coherence, one that emerges from the juxtaposition of differences rather than from the imposition of sameness. The MVRDV pavilion seems ‘useless’ in the modernist paradigm because it refuses their value. In its actual spatial operation, it might be, or it is highly effective.

4. Discussion: Transformations of Grid as Irrational System

The comparative analysis of the case studies reveal a pattern of transformation that operates across multiple levels of architectural meaning and practice. In the modernist paradigm, the grid is an instrument of control. It regulates spatial relation, functional hierarchies, and produces an environment in which the behaviour of occupants is guided by the organization of space. Hence, the grid is a form of spatial governance. In this case, the architect’s rational vision that governed and is being translated into a built environment.

On the other hand, in the irrational paradigm, this controlling function is systematically disrupted. Hejduk’s House displayed the grid’s organizing logic and is retained as formal structure but its spatial consequences are different. Here, instead of producing clarity, the grid produces ambiguity and generates multiplies interpretive possibilities. In Tschumi’s La Villete, the grid establishes a spatial field not hierarchy. In MVRDV’s pavilion, the stacking grid is used to juxtapose different spatial conditions rather than to integrate them into a unified system. Therefore, in each case, the grid remains present as a formal tool, the architects do not abandon it, but its function shifts from the enforcement of order to enabling of experimentation.

This result has significant theoretical implications. It suggests that the grid is not inherently a device of control, as Grant (2018) proposes, but it has become one only when used within a particular ideological framework. From the analysis above, it proves that the same geometric device can be used to produce either closure or openness, governance or liberation, depending on the conceptual intentions of the architect who uses it. This observation echoes findings that prescriptive architectural systems, even when offering precise guidelines, can yield diverse interpretations and applications depending on the designer’s adjustments and creative reasoning (Yatmo & Atmodiwirjo, 2023). The grid, in this sense, becomes a medium of architectural ideology rather than a neutral technical instrument.

The second transformation identified by the analysis concerns the need to celebrate the uselessness. Within the modernist paradigm, spatial conditions that fail to serve predetermined functions are regarded as architectural failures. That is why the useless space (Hejduk’s long corridor and ambiguous room for example) is a problem to be corrected. However, the case studies examined above demonstrate that uselessness is not always a failure but can be a way as a productive design strategy.

Hejduk's elongated corridors are useless in the modernist paradigm because they do not optimize circulation. However, they are experientially generative because their duration and separated floor plate creates conditions for a form of spatial experience. Tschumi's follies are useless because they do not have predetermined functions. However, they are, again, experientially generative because their availability creates conditions for the spontaneous event, and the discovery that cannot be planned. Last but not least, MVRDV's different type of floor plates are useless in the sense of failing to maintain unified architectural language created by the modernist paradigm. However, they are experientially generative because their radical contrast produces another language through spatial discovery. The reevaluation of uselessness as a form of architectural failure can be done when functional optimization does not necessarily become the main objective. Once the paradigm shift, uselessness becomes available as design strategy. Architecture produces spatial conditions whose value lies in experiential, openness, and thus may generate meanings that were not anticipated by the designer.

The third transformation concerns with the reorientation of architectural meaning. In the modernist paradigm, architectural meaning is fixed. It flows from the designer's functional program to the spatial organization of the building to the regulated behaviour of its occupants. Thus, the process starts from the architect, then the space, then the behaviour, then the occupant. In an irrational paradigm, this flow is shifted. From the example of Hejduk's houses above, meaning is produced not by the architect's program but by the occupant's interpretation. From Tschumi's La Villette, meaning is produced by the events that occur in the park's spatial field; whilst in MVRDV's pavilion, meaning is produced by the juxtaposition of heterogeneous spatial significance whose significance can only be grasped through looking at the paradox of coherence. This relocation of meaning challenges the objective of grid in the modernist paradigms. The grid establishes existing meanings and uses of the spaces, and to some extent, the language. However, the irrational paradigm disperses this authority, distributing it to the occupants who construct their readings of the architectural environment through movement, encounter, and interpretation.

Taken together, the three transformations stated above outlines the irrational grid as a design system. Through the argumentation of irrationality, the grid becomes a tool that can do more than just a tool for functional organization and spatial clarity. The four analytical criterias used in this study (ambiguity, separation, event, and diversity) provide an initial vocabulary of an irrational grid system as the basis of design methodology.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate whether and how the architectural grid can operate irrationally, shifting beyond its conventional role as a rational instrument of spatial control in the modernist paradigm. The answer was found from a demonstration through comparative analysis of three case studies, developing theoretical design framework. The study draws on the importance of irrational design framework from critical reading of the modernist design understanding and also building from the Situationist concept of *détournement*, which addresses the importance of distortion as part of design method.

The findings of the study can be summarized as follows. First, the architectural grid is not a neutral technical instrument, but a conceptual tool whose function is determined by the ideological framework within which it is deployed. The same geometric device that produces spatial clarity and functional hierarchy can generate spatial ambiguity and disruption of control. Secondly, the concept of 'uselessness', something that is treated as a design failure within the modernist discourse, can be productively reframed as a design strategy. Hejduk's corridors, Tschumi's unprogrammed follies, and MVRDV's heterogeneous floor plates demonstrates that spatial conditions which fail to meet the modernist criteria of functional optimization can instead generate experiential richness and new spatial discovery. Uselessness, in this sense, is not the absence of architectural value and knowledge but the presence of different kinds of value and knowledge. Something that was created with the reorientation toward experience rather than efficiency.

Third, the shift from rational to irrational grid design involves a redistribution of architectural authority from the designer to the occupant as well. Modernist paradigm holds architect as the main writer for the prescription, while in the irrational paradigm, meaning is also produced through the occupant's movement, encounter, and interpretation. Resulting in a possibility where new meaning and experience emerge from the point of view that even the designer could not have anticipated.

On a theoretical level, this paper works toward making irrationality a legitimate design methodology. On the methodological side, it shows how comparing case studies across different design traditions can be a useful way to spot recurring patterns of transformation. But most importantly, it raises a challenge that labeling certain spatial conditions as "useless" or "irrational" might adhere to functionalism more than it does to the universal architectural truth. Thus, there are several directions future research could take from here. One path would be studying how people actually live in the spaces that was shaped by the four irrational criteria. Second path would be adding the case study analysis to cover a wider range of architects and historical periods, which might surface new modes of grid *détournement* that this study hasn't captured. Last but not least, design research that treats the four criteria not just as analytical tools but as generative ones, could help translate this theoretical framework into practical, everyday architectural application.

All in all, the most significant implication of this research is the simplest: architecture must not be confined simply within the paradigms of direction and control. The grid contains within it multiple possibilities that can grow into a different kind of spatial environment. To recognize this is not to reject rationality but to understand it as one term in a productive dialectic. A dialectic whose other term, irrationality, is equally indispensable to the full range of what architecture can be and do.

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