"Form follows function" was the mantra of early modernists. In their righteous dismissal of ornament as crime, they rejected traditional aesthetics in favor of a functional architecture. They advocated for an architecture detached from symbolic content and derived empirically and rationally, shaped by universal standards of beauty and the technological context of the time. Despite their lofty claims, "the actual commitment to the concept [was] not always an actual concern of the period... and while it is virtually axiomatic that program/function influences the organization of building, the attempts to render that relation explicit have for the most part been mixed."¹ Several critics have pointed out that modernism was only functionalist in name, and that in reality, "the architect was (as he always is) far more intimately concerned with the physical embodiment of even more exacting fantasies."² Throughout modernism and postmodernism, stylistic and formal concerns were prioritized over programmatic ones.³ The formal design for the Seattle Public Library by OMA was derived from analytical diagrams of its intended programs. Before there was form, there was intense scrutiny of its intended functions. The Seattle Public Library can be understood as the exemplary architectural project of the last fifty years because of its successful adherence to the doctrine "form follows function," but in such a way that addresses the nuances of program rather than generalizes it as a universal functional requirement.

Although a critical component of architecture, the notion of program was hardly a part of the discourse throughout modernism and post-modernism. Bernard Tschumi wrote:

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What struck me early on was that most architects are unbelievably passive towards programs. They accept them in a completely uncritical way, dress them up with forms, and thereby miss major opportunities. I admit to having been very irritated vis-à-vis the prevalent ideologies of the seventies, whether the modernist "form follows form" dictum or the subsequent "form follows historical allusion" of architectural postmodernism.4

In the Seattle Public Library, OMA successfully produced a reciprocal relationship between form and program, in which the program helped to drive the form, and the form consequently drove the program. By abstracting the project through diagrams to produce the design, "this graphical substantiation render[ed] program malleable, susceptible to architectural forms of manipulation, such that the overlap, the fold, and compression become programmatic fold, programmatic overlap, and programmatic compression."5 Focus was directed to the relationships and interactions of the parts, and form emerged as a consequence of this.

OMA's exploration of program in his famous Downtown Athletic Club provides an interesting contrast to the Seattle Public Library. In "Life in the Metropolis," Koolhaas discussed how the program in the athletic club generated a very unique condition in the way that new relationships and situations were created through the peculiar mix of programs. This is especially evident on the 9th floor, where the placement of the locker room, a boxing ring, and an oysterbar, left one "eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked on the 9th floor -- such is the plot of this floor -- the 20th century in action."6 A similar condition is set up in the Seattle Public Library, where various programs overlap and generate new conditions. After defining the specific programs and designing individual platforms to house these activities, spaces for generic program, such as open reading areas, were then placed in between via a ramp. This design compartmentalized the space into

specific spaces, but also created flexibility and set up conditions for cross-pollination of activity in the spaces between. This exploration of program with surreal connections can be traced back to Koolhaas' embrace of ordered chaos in "Life in the Metropolis," in which he saw in New York a resultant congestion from which unimagined situations emerged. Both the Downtown Athletic Club and the Seattle Public Library embody Koolhaas' desire to represent a metropolitan condition within architecture, where unconventional proximities and relationships set up conditions for interesting program.

The derivation of the form through diagrams of the building's programmatic aspirations represents a true departure from the univalent forms of early modernism. In "The Death of Modern Architecture," Jencks partially attributed the failure of modern architecture to its reverence of univalent form, which had "become fetishised to the point where it overwhelms all other concerns." Jencks criticized the undiscerning use of reductive boxy forms that were born out of the notion that such a reduced style was both rational and universal. He remarked, "That no one asked to live in a factory did not occur to the doctor-modern-architect, because he was out to cure the disease of modern cities." Decorum, then, was not important to such modern architects as Mies van der Rohe, who perceived the function of a building as ephemeral. In contrast, OMA prioritized its focus on the various programs it sought to accommodate from the start of the conceptualization of the project. Before any design was done, OMA committed a substantial amount of time to research the role of the library in the modern day and position the Seattle Public Library within this discourse. By

7 OMA/LMN. “Seattle Public Library Proposal.” The Seattle Public Library, www.slp.org,
revisiting and ultimately rejecting the traditional flat organization of libraries because of its failure to efficiently accommodate growing and shrinking collections overtime, OMA sought to better address the evolved needs of the modern library by arranging the collection in a continuous ribbon running in a multi-story spiral.\textsuperscript{11} OMA also recognized the new social role of the modern library and sought to address these new responsibilities. In contrast to the generalization of function in modernism and the insensitive packaging of different programs to univalent forms, the Seattle Public Library was highly sensitive to the functional roles of the building from the start. More than that, it questioned the broader role of the library at a larger scale and its relationship to evolving technology. McMorrough wrote, "When the needs of the user can no longer be accommodated over time, the building is rendered obsolete."\textsuperscript{12} OMA avoided this path towards programmatic failure by designing the library so that it anticipated evolving needs.

The significance of the Seattle Public Library can be understood in the terms that Colin Rowe uses in his "Introduction" to \textit{Five Architects}, in which he questioned the original ambitions of modern architecture. Rowe argued that modern architecture's new embrace of empirical facts and supposed detachment from symbolic content served as a mere disguise for architects to explore forms, what Rowe termed the "physique-flesh," without critically engaging meaning, which he termed "morale-word." Rowe believed that the morale and physique of modern architecture has never, and will never, occur together. I believe that the Seattle Public Library comes pretty close. Although Koolhaas admitted that the sequence of diagramming was necessitated by a need for a linear, logical process to present to a Board of Trustees, and certain diagrams were actually drawings

\textsuperscript{12} McMorrough, John. "Notes of the Adaptive Re-use of Program" 107.
that came after the fact\textsuperscript{13}, the level of analysis spent parsing out the morale before making decisions about the physique merits recognition.

Despite its logical progression, it would be hard to argue that the physique was derived purely from the morale. The Seattle Public Library serves as a prime example of Rowe's speculation that modern architectural theory has less to do with the making of buildings as it does with relieving the architect of feelings of guilt and responsibility for his decisions. By excessively diagramming all of the considerations in the project, Koolhaas was able to claim that the ultimate design was the pure product of its needs. When the design was unveiled, critics of the building saw it as a product of OMA's whim and ego, rather than an engagement of the site. By tracing design decisions to programmatic needs, however, it was easy to defend the building's integrity and make the claim that the entire design was created from addressing the needs of the librarians and the public.\textsuperscript{14} Like modernist architects who claimed that their work were a pure product of external events of an age, and disguising what is likely a symbolic work colored with the architect's individuality, Koolhaas justified the physique of the library through heavy diagramming of its morale and was thus vindicated from responsibility. Though Rowe may be accurate in that regard, this raises larger questions about whether architecture needs to be (or even can be) fully justified by reasons detached from one's authorship.

Similar to the presentation of the library in the form of programmatic diagrams, FOA, the architects of the Yokohama Port Terminal, famously communicated their design to the client with an image of the Hokusai Wave. Questions were raised about the merits of this rationalization, and


whether it was too reductive or an effective means of communication. Despite Koolhaas’ decision to rationalize every formal move, perhaps out of necessity to win the commission, the design embodies what Rowe proposed to be the most realistic solution, by adhering to the physique and relegating the morale to "little more than a constellation of escapist myths."

In sum, the process through which the design of the Seattle Public Library came to fruition and its ultimate delivery embodies the successes and ideals that modernist architecture celebrated but failed to achieve. McMorrough wrote, "Architecture might have promised too much... With the twin impulses of technical inevitability and social contract, architectural Modernism had come to represent a tangled web of motivations that were held simultaneously as style, politics, and zeitgeist." In designing the Seattle Public Library, OMA untangles this complicated web by revisiting one of the basic motivations of modernism--function--and prioritizing its nuanced needs to drive all subsequent decisions.


Bibliography


