

A Hotel is Not a Home: Strange Sites and Figures

As Maison Domino anticipated, we are increasingly immersed in a world of best practices that seek efficiency and known quantities. If we are to engage the majority of buildings as (value) engineered units, can we look to other paradigms outside of tectonic exceptionalism? Perhaps architectural figuration and shaping can provide a double-edged blade of both expediency and estrangement that hacks the generic underbrush in order to uncover the strange bedfellows of affordability, iconography, branding, and weird urbanism.

In Frampton's version of tectonics, construction comes first, then surface, volume, and plan. The foregrounding of aesthetic craft claims to resist homogenizing tendencies of globalization as well as the reduction of building to glib scenography.¹ This sect believes that the primordial task of mooring shelter to ground reveals the phenomenological dimensions of the genius loci, or uniqueness of place. Within such a tectonic paradigm, architectural value and singularity privileges part-to-part clarity, environmental perception, and cultural practice. However, in such an increasingly financialized world where generic buildings often leave no room for architectural experimentation or activism, should we as architects divest from the typical urban fabric as an impenetrable landscape of brutish development? As Maison Domino anticipated, we are increasingly immersed in a world of best practices that seek efficiency and known quantities. If we are to engage the majority of buildings as (value) engineered units, can we look to other paradigms outside of tectonic exceptionalism? Perhaps architectural figuration and shaping can provide a double-edged blade of both expediency and estrangement that hacks the generic underbrush in order to uncover the strange bedfellows of affordability, iconography, branding, and weird urbanism.

Specifically, I will explore two recent hotel proposals by ALLTHATISSOLID located in Kuala Lumpur: one is a renovation, and the other is all new construction. Facts on the ground do not bode well for tectonic innovation. Both hotels are narrow urban infill lots with a cellular grain requiring rigid space planning, where profit margins of the hospitality industry resist encroachment and modification of floor space. And yet, market branding is optimistic and omnivorous, ready to consume formal exuberance that vaguely smells of demographic identity. The hotel is not a home, but a home away from Home, forever built upon a displaced ontological ground. Therefore, against tectonics, we offer an alternative set of techniques: urban silhouettes, typological ambiguity, vestigial meanings, and inverted figures.

RECENT SCHISM: NOTATION VS GRAPHICS

R.E. Somol's article "Green Dots 101" most charismatically frames the categorical divide between the two different genealogies of tectonics and figuration. Frampton's critical tectonics and Eisenman's indexical process are both projects in search of autonomous

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architecture resistant to the instrumental and scenographic tendencies of commercialism. Autonomous and authentic architecture emerges from a process of assembly and articulation, the contingencies of construction and disciplinary knowledge. However, everywhere we look, the world is bubbling over with oddities, counterintuitives, and rapid upheaval that would render such operations into a provisional and losing battle. As such, tectonics' claims for authenticity, groundedness, and innovation, critical or otherwise, are all principles that need to be expunged as criteria for any relevant architectural project today. Even inside architecture's own networks of practitioners, educators, and students, the loss of common disciplinary knowledge challenges the notion of a readership that can critically engage the arcana of critical tectonics. In the very same publication of "Green Dots 101", Eisenman mourns this loss of readership and the subsequent legibility of the indexical project and forces him to hedge on the "between condition that is neither an index nor any other critical form...which, as it is argued here, produces an architectural object that is perhaps more appropriate to today's subject and reader." This in-between diagram emerges as "partial figures" that "speak of neither function, meaning, nor image."² Fearful that there can no longer be an authentic critical project, Eisenman lapses into solipsistic autonomy. In direct response, Somol leap-frogs over Eisenman's anxiety and embraces Venturi's shed and Hejduk's characters and extends then into a contemporary interest in shape and figuration as techniques towards a larger project of graphic expediency, a unitarian sermon for the heretical and non-denominational masses. Indifferent to the critical build up of architectural parts and diagrams, Somol's development of the graphic method is interested in the cool and easy as constructive of an elastic political process of building audiences, or "custom massification".

CRITICAL ANXIETY & NEW AUDIENCES

Digital design methods further exacerbate the crisis of tectonics. Within the sublime force-free world of computation, form-finding techniques withdraws into the schizophrenic simultaneity of both relational systems and stylistic intuition. This new mannerism jeopardizes Vitruvian firmitas and architects like Wes Jones, inclined to arbitrate between tectonic tradition and formal innovation can't resist asking "Can tectonics grasp smoothness?"³ Meanwhile younger digitalists evade this chokehold by inverting received values and rejoice in the superficial. Swerving towards affect, these designers deploy surfaces and proliferate atmospheric sensation as a means to seduce new audiences. In a conversation assessing the insurgent capacities of the superficial, Heather Roberge argues that "the superficial is a reaction against functionalism's hold on architectural expression...(and) is deeply engaging to audiences, and therefore extends architecture's role as social practice. Shared experience in turn forms communities, alters behavior, and contributes to culture."⁴ This shift away from process and part-to-whole articulation emphasizes complex effects as "social practice," a political goal very close to Somol's own focus "on audience and reception, and what might now be characterized as a custom massification, the specific fashioning of unlikely collectives and synthetic communities...a cultural-political world of plastic relationships."⁵ This sharing of cross-purposes among a more amiable coterie of designers a half-generation younger are quickly eroding the demarcations between intricate process and plastic shapes.

NEW FIGURATION: NO ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

Recently, new experimentation in figurative form among younger designers and educators are proving that the differences in technique, whether they be cartoon drawing, foam carving, material processing, or digital modeling, are less cogent than the common interest in figuration independent of part aggregation or tectonic articulation.⁶ These figural objects are extroverted and gregarious where the manipulation of features, anatomies, and silhouettes either subvert legibility or intensify ambiguity. Though this menagerie of work emerges from disparate lineages, including the duelling camps of the notational and graphic, they find allegiance in their disregard for contingent forces as a process of formation. Instead,

this work poses an outward facing autonomy inserted into a messy world of contingencies. Without programmatic, material, or socio-political contingencies to worry over, no assembly (both tectonic or conceptual) is required, and therefore, no parts are included. New Figuration is not unlike Deleuze's description of Francis Bacon as "a painter of heads, not faces" using a strategy which "pursues a very peculiar project as a portrait painter: to dismantle the face, to rediscover the head or make it emerge from beneath the face."⁷ The categorical importance of such work can be described as wholes effacing parts.

FIGURES BEGET FIGURES

Extending the possibilities of New Figuration, recent projects by ALLTHATISSOLID explores figuration which proliferates beyond the exterior of an object onto the interior, where stochastic, thermodynamic, and programmatic thresholds collude to induce new figural wholes. Because figuration is predominantly concerned with external forms, they produce figure/ground relations confined to dyadic constructions: architecture/city, mascot/audience, subject/object, etc. Not only effacing parts, New Figuration ignore interiors. Somol renounces form and its interior counterpart, volume. He would prefer that interiors be hollow, a negative critique not of what it should be but of what it should not be—a decoupling from and indifference to the exterior whole. Somewhere between hollow indifference and the functioning index, the figuration constructs thresholds which in turn produce new possible figures through shifting, sliding, and undermining the illusion of a unitary whole. Rather than claiming to elucidate traces of operational figures, interior thresholds produce simultaneity of multiple figures, one entirely different from the next, a flurry of wholes within holes. Here, internal elements like core, slab, room, and atria can reconfigure supersede the legibility of constituent parts.

Two hotel proposals by ALLTHATISSOLID, referred here as CBB and HJH, were simultaneously commissioned by two separate clients whose sites and programs are serendipitously similar in typology and urban siting. This coincidence casts the two as strange urban cousins. They are both urban infill lots introduced into an older mid-century fabric of two and three-story shop fronts separated by firewalls. As buildable height limits increase, new construction in this neighborhood fabric is either charismatic, hustlers of commerce and identity, or vernacular, agitators of visual cacophony rampant in the city. This *mise-en-place* formulates the problem: a dearth of tectonic opportunism and a maximum oscillation of urban difference all squeezed into a lot which only affords two facades. Therefore the design intentions are thus: the deployment of architectural figuration generates multiplicity by cleaving, forming, and gathering otherwise typical elements in order to expand an otherwise compressed mass and regulated interior. A hotel is not a home. Therefore the abstraction of place, travel, arrival and departure should never be articulated as a continuous architectural promenade, but instead, much like Hejduk's *Diamond*, enforces a scattering of figures and shapes through the transliteration of threshold. Thresholds substantiate new figures whether they be architecture/city, facade/interior, public/private, or program/micro-climate.

ARCHITECTURE AND THE CITY: FACADE, FIGURE, HOLE

For the moment, the hotel proposals (at seven and eight stories respectively) stand head and shoulders above their immediate two to three story neighbors, instigating issues of contextual propriety and iconic difference. As with many Asian cities under rapid development, liberal attitudes towards neighborhood character allow for maximum differences. A quick scan of the city conjures a litany of exuberant facades, whether good, bad, or ugly, is left as a matter of taste. These cousin hotels immediately exert a figured presence along the street, a consequence of its massing that dovetails nicely with the lifestyle branding desired by the clients. In designing two at once, the exceptionalism of a single project immediately abrogates to the possibility of serial typology. In designing one more than one, two hotels already implicate a latent urbanism of iconography. However, does iconic immediacy, or the



single-take, based on simple deviation still work in a jungle of icons? As the young art brigands turned marketing consultants, K-Hole, have coined, this is the age of Norm-core:

“If the rule is Think Different, being seen as normal is the scariest thing...Which paradoxically makes normalcy ripe for the Mass Indie überelites to adopt as their own, confirming their status by showing how disposable the trappings of uniqueness are. The most different thing to do is to reject being different all together. When the fringes get more and more crowded, Mass Indie turns toward the middle. Having mastered difference, the truly cool attempt to master sameness.”⁸

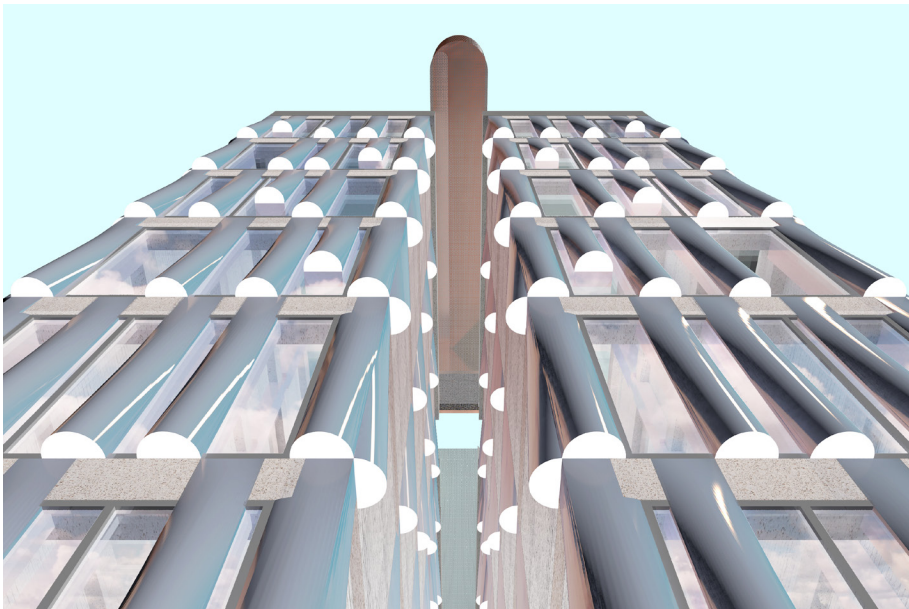
The only way to be subversive is to appear normal, adorning oneself like a middle-aged suburban dad. This is the age of doppelgangers and the double-take. Difference is not detected immediately, projecting its identity in a latent manner, in a delayed state of attention. Yet, Kuala Lumpur’s street scene is equally exceptional and normal, oscillating between the two so that neither the single-take (icon) nor double-take (norm-core) strategies seem significant enough. In a third way, CBB and HJH aspire for the triple-take, multiple back and forth glances that demotes the gaze into a nystagmic disorientation. Instead of focusing attention on any particular figure, the triple-take expands vision towards the milieu or the proliferated figure.

THE DIFFUSE WHOLE

Both the single and double-take maintains dichotomies: either the exceptional/generic or authentic/ironic Normal. With the triple-take, urban difference becomes atomized and distributed evenly so that the dichotomous figure/ground construction of difference becomes a more saturated figure/figure where the significant and insignificant are diffuse. In this manner, the hotel facades’ ceremonial function is more cryptic and attempt to distribute identity and attention across the neighborhood and cityscape augmenting the uncanny qualities already permeating the urban multitude. In HJH the facade renovation deploys modular panels conceived as upside down arch infills, or put in a different way, upside down tombstones. The deadpan shapes and oblique reference to vestigial classical form is immediate and extroverted. However, they are not quite friendly and have a stoic quality about them. Distributed across the facade, they are neither the regulated matrix of the modernist brise-soleil, nor the compositions of post-modern vernaculars, nor the performatism of parametric intricacy occasionally found haute-couture districts. By being slightly off-kilter and fastidiously none of the above, the hotels become like pollen, disseminating allergens irritating equally the sincerity and platitudes of the surrounding vernacular without being critical of them. In this way, both hotels work together as sly cousins instigating an urbanism of aesthetic drift. And all the while, the facades perform their contextual function, creating shade and avoiding thermal transfer to the units behind. In CBB, the facade also pragmatically offers a shading device, but its aesthetic strategies are slightly

Figure 1: Conceptual Urban Elevation

different. Here, they use tectonics as a foil by which to play more deviant games. False hanging columns are arrayed across the facade in a compositional field no unlike latter-day stylings of neo-liberal modernism. This screen is both an allusion to and ornamental extension of the precast concrete structure. The structural columns deviate from its precast and flare at the base. While a simple sculptural gesture, the flare reminds us of Heinrich Wölfflin's pejorative description of the baroque. For Wölfflin, Renaissance tectonics represented a high achievement with part-to-whole clarity, lightness, and freedom, whereas the baroque was lambasted as "the individual element...deprived of its value and force, and structural members were multiplied and lost their independent mobility, imprisoned in the material." Wölfflin focuses attention on the shift from the Renaissance round column to the Baroque's invention of the square pier. The column is "all will and vitality" while the pier remains "stuck in the wall" with "solemnity" and "massiveness".⁹ In CBB, the precast columns are the result of a morphed hybrid of both column and pier, lofting from circle to square, undecidedly both Renaissance and Baroque. Things get even stranger when the columns turn the corner of the building so that two flares rotated ninety degrees, superimposed upon one another, form a perfect heart shape. These columns are sympathetic to the Baroque's revolt against clarity and propriety, but they do this not through geometric deformation, but through the decoupling of shapes from their constructional episteme. The three dimensional smoothness of the figure is undercut by the shape graphic seen from below. As one looks up towards the building, a prominent upward vantage, the serial array of semicircles immediately produces the whole through pure serial effect. Unlike the exalted precast art in buildings such as the Richards Medical Center, here the effect is more existential and less picturesque, having more affinity with nervous totality of Yayoi Kusama than the poesis of Louis Kahn. This graphic ornamentation begins to perforate the object revealing otherness, an unveiling of an object beyond the object.

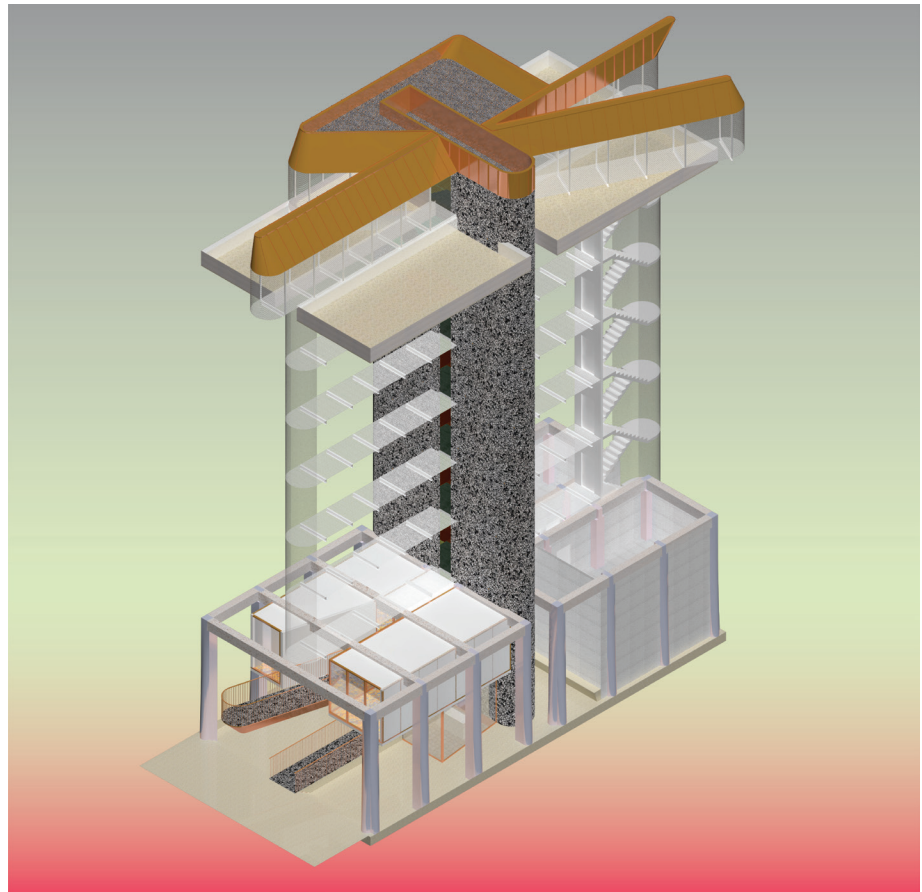


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SEQUENTIAL FIGURES

The part of CBB begins with the client's bundling of two lots, distinguishing the building's use and identity apart from the low-rise shopfronts. Rather than enclosing the two lots in one volume, the necessity of room planning, the most machinic requirement of the brief, culminates in a cruciform plan where the corridors hold apart 4 mini-towers. This immediately establishes a figuration of core, circulation, and deep interior reinforcing architectural thresholds rather than circulatory continuity. Avoiding the gregarious figure, the typical strategy where sculptural form wiggles away and slips out of a pre-established matrix of

Figure 2: Upward view of flared columns



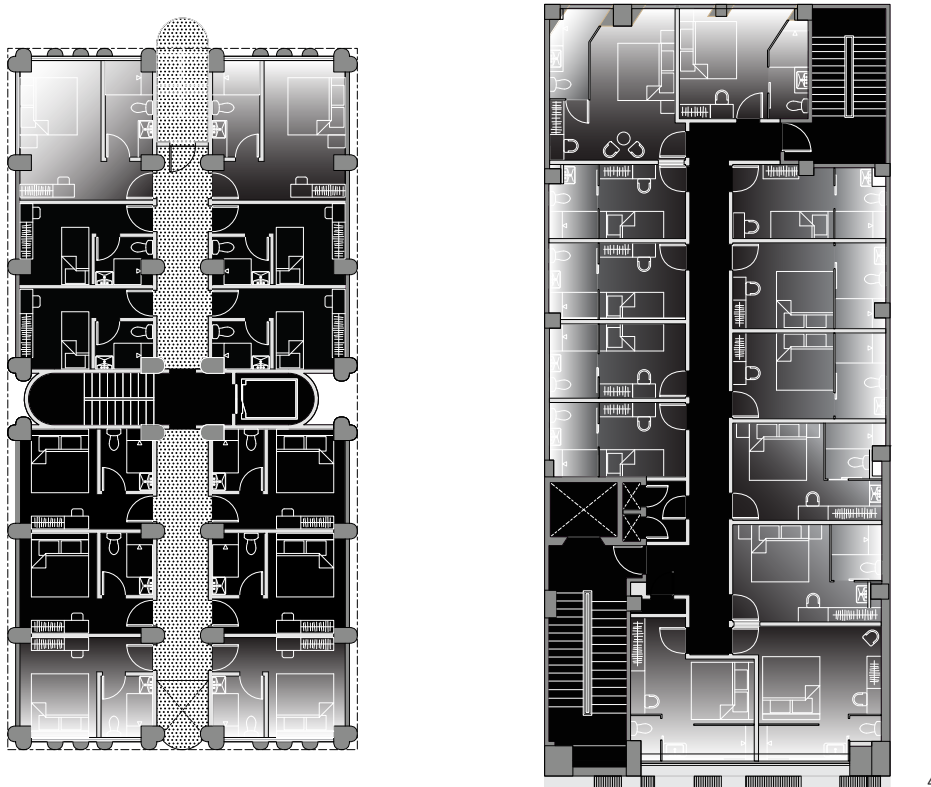
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trabeation, the cruciform figure is integral to the organization of structure, volume, and plan, simultaneity that goes against the sequential legibility of Frampton's tectonics. This organizational figure divides, separates, and pulls apart other figures, creating worlds whose relations are decouple and realign with various elements, fused in the memory and bodily awareness of the user.

As hotel guests move through the building to arrive at their temporary home away from home, they encounter a registration of figures which flicker in and out through an unfolding sequence where one figure becomes the ground to a new unforeseen figure. Upon first arrival to CBB, the first figure appears out of the ground operation forged by the doubly bundled lot. This reterritorialization appears as a shadowy hole where the four towers above are truncated at the bottom two public levels, a reversal of the dense mass and opacity of the 2-story shopfronts lining the block. The shaded ground lobby and open-air lounge spaces serve to act as a refuge from the hot tropical sun both reinforcing the overhanging presence of the monumental facade above while withdrawing from the outward densification of the building-lined street. The constant modulation of micro-environments throughout the building intensifies the experience of figural thresholds. This bodily perception triggers an awareness of stepping in and stepping out, being contained within one realm and not within another. The proliferation of figures occurs through the coordinated coincidence of spatial, visual, programmatic, and climatic thresholds that either align or misalign with one another. The ideal choreography from check-in to individual room requires stepping across a set of binary transitions, hot/cold-warm/cool, with the intention to gradually dial down the fluctuation between temperature swings in an overall diminuendo across the ambulatory sequence. Escaping the ambient heat of the city, one quickly enters a conditioned lobby space; then steps back into a shaded lobby mediated by indirect

Figure 3: Axonometric view of interior

lighting and vegetation being both inside and under the mass while remaining outside of both the building's enclosure and figural core. From there, one moves into the fire-rated core which also serves as the main vertical egress. By necessity the vertical tube is sealed and so architecturally produces a space of enclosure and internalization. The solidity of the core obscures the cruciform which it is perfectly slotted into both producing continuity of egress while obstructing front and back of house. The floor and walls are skinned in masonry tiles and air conditioning cools the upward ascent within the belly of the figure. Arriving at one's floor destination, one emerges from the core and onto the corridors exposed to floors above and below through the expanded steel mesh of the floor decking unifying the figure of the cruciform. Here, one is suddenly and simultaneously both within one figure and outside another. Walking to the rooms, one remains suspended in an airy gap between the four concrete blocks of hotel rooms while also severed from the sealed interiority of the egress shaft. In the penultimate space before disappearing into one's room, the corridor is airy, warm, and exposed, a counterintuitive openness giving pause and reflection to the suggestion that there has been a choreography this entire time. Perhaps undertaking such a promenade of stepped difference might induce a retroactive survey of the figures one has just experienced.



HOME AWAY FROM HOME

The most architecturally stifled element is the hotel room. Deeply internalized and most rigid of all pieces, the rooms are the engine of the economic machine. The intractability of deep interiors, flat floors, hermetically sealed rooms are where the sociability of figurative form has no recourse. Image and icon is always on the outside surface. The uncanny lurks on the interior in the almost imperceptible slippages that occur within the all too familiar and generic; small acts of displacement which can lead to radical reorientation. A hotel is never a home, and its dislodged interiority exacerbates the loss of intimacy and replaces it with vernaculars of domestic space suspended in a placeless of vacuum. In both CBB and HJH, the hotel rooms' get distilled into its fundamental and typological trait as an architectural

Figure 4: Plans, CBB (left), HJH (right)

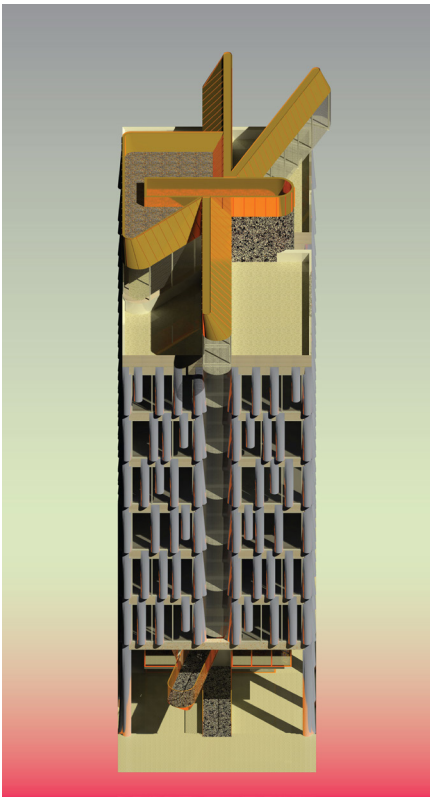


Figure 5: CBB

synecdoche for the larger modern condition of placeless anonymity within the metropolis. Apart from the front and back facades, natural lighting inside the hotel rooms is not guaranteed in perpetuity. The longitudinal facades exist until their neighbors decide to build out the maximum height limit. As a result, the layout of the hotel rooms must confront the conundrum which results from the contradictory agendas of city planning and developer clients. One imminent day, all interior rooms will be entombed in rooms without a view, a device which is usually the last and only connection a hotel room has to its site. Similar to the infamous love motels of Korea and Japan, these rooms withdraw into deeply interiorized rooms of secrecy and unsanctioned trysts. In order to intensify the consequence of this situation, the design uses a strategy of indifference to transform necessity into strangeness. In HJH, the project is a renovation of an existing prestressed concrete structure. Accordingly, the center of the structural deck cannot be punctured with plumbing along the center of the slab. Therefore, the hotel room is flipped from the typical plan where wet and opaque bathrooms are usually distributed along the central corridor spine. Instead the bathrooms are now placed at the exterior wall, and the temporary fenestration that exists at the long facades allow sunlight to emanate through a series of translucent planes onto the interior, a programmatic and atmospheric reorientation of the interior. Likewise, privacy is pushed to the exterior edge, producing an urban facade resulting from the technical problems of adaptive re-use. Interior privacy gets flipped inside out, an inverse operation where connecting the containment of the atomized individual back out towards an urban collective.

Arriving at the top of CBB's roof deck, the final and perhaps most explicit figure is on emerges. This figurative form is a variation on the extruded cruciform gone slightly wild as it extends its limbs to both connect and partition the various programs in a cryptic manner: the first arm extends to the bar and lounge on either side, a second swells to contain the bar, a third takes you back to the restrooms, and a fourth wayward limb obfuscates the third, seducing the user towards a dead-end viewing portal providing vistas out onto the city. This spider-like figure contains the user within a narrow diaphanous body that serves as a conduit and partition, delaying and obscuring the airy open plan typical of many hotel rooftops. The paradox here is that the most externally sculptural and middle-scaled shape in the project is barely seen from below or from the surrounding area. The figure is instrumental as a threshold disrupting and separating uses and the progression of experience.

Taken together, the figural tactics of HJH and CBB suggests that many of the aspirations of New Figuration in architecture should be explored on the interior so that temporal and conceptual configurations can unfold throughout the architectural object. The figural project is no longer burdened by sheepish guilt and self-justification. There are too many social and political opportunities that would be hindered by the introverted notations accumulated through indexical operation or intricate fabrication protocols. Neither in denial of nor contingent upon the expression of the parts, simultaneous and multiple figures acknowledges the strange and unwieldy reality of multiple worlds that can be contained within one object. Exceeding volumetric form, figural boundaries go beyond edges, membranes, and walls. Instead the figure is inclusive and participatory, allowing parts to lump into objects cast against others objects of indifference. While tectonics evolves construction into culture and cartoons produce collectivities, interior figures rearrange subjects and produce the situated and temporal uncanny.

ENDNOTES

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9. Heinrich Wofflin, *Renaissance and Baroque* (London: Collins/Fontana Library, 1964), 49–50.