



Michael Speaks

## A new breed of intelligence

Theory is dead. Long live architecture, says Los Angeles writer Michael Speaks. Ellie Duffy heard him talk at the AA

Who are these people? They're tuned in to the language of business management theory and have appropriated scenario-planning as a design tool. They interact intelligently with commerce in a way that means they don't need to regard themselves as simply complicit. They see themselves as innovators as opposed to problem solvers, and their approach to the design process can be characterised as prolific and discursive (the outset of a project is likely to be marked by a model-making frenzy of rapid prototyping to structure dialogue with a wide spectrum of user groups). They're also more likely to be found in the Netherlands than in the US.

Who are they? The new breed of architect, according to Michael Speaks. Theory, claims Speaks, is definitely over: in fact the New York Times announced its demise as long ago as 2003, but that was in relation to the literary theory that spawned what Speaks refers to as "philosophy-lite" – the "text"-based deconstructivist preoccupations that came to saturate architectural academia in the eighties and nineties. Now architecture – a little late as usual, he observes – has clocked this sea change too.

What has changed, he says, is the world around us. Speaks's argument is based on the premise that the sheer volume of information now readily available (and the speed at which it can be accessed digitally) has fundamentally altered our relationship with the philosophical concept of "truth".

The US alone registers 3.5 billion Google searches a month. There's a lot of information out there, but who's to say which of it is "right" or current or relevant?

Speaks claims: "We are indifferent to truth but at the same time fish little truths from the information around us... Now the ambition is to transform chatter into active intelligence."

Central to Speaks's proposition is the idea that an important outcome of this shift in focus from truth to intelligence is a reconfigured relationship between thinking and doing. If the aim of philosophy is to find truth, the argument goes, its function is to use it to inform ways of "doing". This, he claims, has gone on to affect architecture in rather an interesting way: it has undermined the validity of modernist and post-modernist "vanguardism" – the endless search for grander ideas or truer manifestos with which to lead practice. Now, with the cultural emphasis squarely on design intelligence, he argues, architectural practice is becoming necessarily more focused on communication with clients and users, is evolving in effect into a more iterative process.

“The sheer volume of information now readily available has altered our relationship with the concept of ‘truth’”

So who are these architects? The emphasis of Speaks’s lecture was shifted in favour of a somewhat linear comparative analysis of the characteristics of modernist and post-modernist theory. But practitioners mentioned included Rem Koolhaas, whose prolific design prototyping methods at OMA were compared to Jacques Herzog’s apparently more controlled model-making exploits. Other projects referred to included MVRDV’s “region maker” tool for envisioning masterplanning decisions – a way of gathering data and visually speculating with it to feed back into the design process; and MAX 1 and Crimson’s “orgware” strategy, used to work with local groups in developing a 10-year flexible masterplan for a new suburb of Utrecht.

Speaks notes that, generally speaking, the Dutch seem more attuned to pushing at the parameters of digital technology in the pursuit of “knowledge”, whereas in the US the tendency is still to use technology to explore “form”.

There is undoubtedly an element of the surreal in Michael Speaks’s argument: hold on, one thinks, isn’t this “non-theory” argument essentially yet another manifesto for architecture? Does Speaks’s analysis stand up on its own two feet in the real world, beyond the introverted context of the theory that preceded it – theory that is now not only dead but at least partly discredited?

But there remain two rather compelling and relevant calls, albeit from academia, inherent in Speaks’s argument. The first is for architectural theory – what’s left of it – and architectural practice to find a middle ground on which they can engage in productive dialogue. The second is for the discipline of architecture as a whole to engage more fully, more intelligently with the reality (and the virtual reality) of the world around it – market states, spreadsheets, clients and all.