Flash Art Volumes

Crisis Formalism

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If we can agree that architecture is now at a tipping point where form, once immediate and vital, threatens to vanish into a haze of multiplying crises, then it is precisely this moment that demands we reimagine form as the very causality of crisis rather than its collateral damage. Architecture's unease with crisis is hardly new; modernists, postmodernists, deconstructivists, and parametricians have each, in turn, declared a state of emergency in which the discipline finds itself faltering. Yet one persistent drama across the twentieth century was whether architecture can be a political agent in crisis— be it housing, civic identity, or technological modernization.

Today's scenario is murkier. In our present day, even the neatest problems seem entangled with countless others, forming what Edgar Morin calls the "polycrisis," an explosive web that confounds both institutional structures and our own inherited frameworks.[1] Where architecture once believed in its capacity to generate stable meaning, today's swirl of economic, environmental, and political emergencies has undone that assumption. Many now retreat from architecture toward more concrete political acts — upstream into policy and finance, downstream into labor, energy, and carbon. Yet, that collective turmoil need not erode architecture's cultural potency. "Crisis Formalism" contends that form — long dismissed as a mere aesthetic flourish — can become the container of crisis, a site where intensities catalyze subversive architectures that reclaim a lost political agency. Put simply, what are the formal implications of crisis?

To locate historically how crisis has demonstrated causality within architecture, we can revisit the Kaiping Diaolou in Guangdong, China. These towers — numbering more than one thousand and eight hundred — did not arise from any single impetus, but from a nexus of crises: bandit invasions, seasonal floods, forced migratory patterns, economic upheaval, and cross-cultural exchanges. The architecture that resulted, especially between 1900 and 1931, exhibits forms that blend defensive thickness (thick fortified walls, raised or stilted entries to deter arson) with ornamentations drawn from Western styles.

The impetus came from returning laborers who faced exclusionary policies in North America and Europe.[2] Forced back to Kaiping with newly accumulated wealth and partial exposure to Western building techniques, they poured resources into constructing towers that would both protect their families from unrest and signal a certain cosmopolitan aspiration in the façade details.[3] The Diaolou thus exemplify how multiple overlapping disruptions — political instability, climate vulnerability, forced migration, external building technologies — fuse into a distinctive crisis morphology. Architecture in this instance stands as a direct articulation of polycrisis, weaving external intensities into form. The towers do not politely "solve" these crises but crystallize them as cultural statements. Far from purely local phenomena, these watchtowers reveal that crisis can yield an architecture that is a repository of tensions.

Today, Crisis Formalism stands on a dual register: first, architectural form has lost immediacy and resonance; second, the contemporary emergencies of our era require more than patchwork interventions or data-driven rationales. If architects address crises in isolation — geopolitical, financial, or climatic — our designs unravel under the load of their interlocking demands.

Morin warns that this isolation falls prey to "the blindness produced by fragmented and reductionist thinking"[4] leaving us with responsive structures that inadvertently feed the very crises they intended to solve. Morin's vantage depicts a polycrisis unspooling in relentless shocks — wars, natural disasters, pandemics — none wholly distinct or fully comprehensible in real time.[5] Similarly, Paul Valéry's *Crisis of the Mind*, written in 1919 after World War I, recognized a deceptive intellectual crisis that demanded aesthetic reinventions like defamiliarization and abstraction.[6] Our own moment is similarly choked by inequalities, resource extraction, high-carbon consumption, and unregulated capital expansions, each compounding the next. For architects, the challenge of our time is not to react to these crises, but to situate ourselves within it. Crisis Formalism argues for architecture's re-engagement with form as a material interrogation of contemporary crises.

Once radical tactics — dystopian collages, comedic inversions, utopian visions — have grown feeble and co-opted by the very forces they once opposed. As soon as a disciplinary response to crisis becomes legible, it becomes a product, risking its absorption into marketing cycles. Crisis Formalism aggregates itself into a complex of failures and interwoven dilemmas. Defined by infinite integration of outside forces — superimposed,

intersected, made codependent, doubled, or destabilized by any perception of wholeness or hierarchy — it is a strategic, continuous interplay of form, social antagonism, and speculation. Form becomes a symbolic space for letting contradictory energies play out — neither cowering before doom nor pretending to "fix" it with illusions.

In one of our Crisis Formalism "test" workshops with Robert Levit, Elisa Iturbe, Cameron Wu, and Preston Scott Cohen, we examined questions of formal causality: What forces can truthfully distort architectural form? Crisis Formalism challenges architecture's traditional cause-and-effect logic, arguing that form today must emerge from crisis rather than merely respond to it." Finding a new causality is itself a marker of our disciplinary wilderness.

Robert Levit's concept of the "entropic city"[7] dismisses linear causality for entropy. Causality traces simple sequences and ultimately fails to capture the interconnected complexity of a polycrisis. By contrast, an entropic framework embraces disorder as generative, allowing architectural form to emerge from overlapping, contradictory flows of crisis.

We must therefore reexamine how architecture and politics relate. If call-and-response paradigms — problem and solution — are not viable in the polycrisis, how does the political reengage with architectural work? Since the polycrisis strips the political teeth from reactionary design, it can seem logical to abandon architecture altogether. But within these burning relationships of the polycrisis, we must re-summon form.

A potent example is the Viewing Platform by Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, constructed of scaffolding and plywood after 9/11. The platform offered more communal relief than a thousand polished memorial designs. This minimal, nearly improvised structure became a shock absorber for a grief-stricken New York, facilitating communal mourning and reconnecting the city's "phantom limb" to the flow of crisis tourism.We are presented with a problem of redefining representational architecture — not as mere symbolism, but as the deliberate integration of politics into form. Architecture made from the very phase of crisis in which the work exists. In our survey of architecture and crisis, we have compiled a set of architectural ideas that do not respond to crises directly but instead employ formal tools that dissolve their own logic rather than offering clarity. This approach shows how to integrate crisis and form without succumbing to the *blindness of fragmentation*.

Crisis Formalism assembles a constellation of projects that interrogate crisis and form through different modes. Operating within the blurry politics of annihilation, *Crazy Spirit* shows artists and architects trying to expose this blurry edge, challenging the discipline. *Form Follows Forces* captures ways in which unstoppable economic and ecological pressures coalesce into unexpected geometry and shape. *Dada Decon* explores how our existing buildings can be subverted as a readymade. *Collapse* presents a group of young architects creating meaning from the immediacy of the crises we are facing — formalizing the collapse. We have tried to summarize how crisis and form can be understood and how the polycrisis articulates the diffused conditions of the challenges we face. Crisis Formalism argues for architecture's re-engagement with form as an imperative to revive its representative political power.

Although many retreat from the discipline, we believe crises are reconfiguring the field in unforeseen ways, bringing new forms to architecture. Form here denotes geometry, structure, aperture, and composition — the elemental conditions architects must shape. Emerging forms are not uniform; they align with diverse theories spanning media, economics, construction, labor, climate, and more.If illusions of stable progress have collapsed, then a newly charged role for architectural form emerges — one that embeds catastrophe at its core. That is the wager of Crisis Formalism: to keep architecture from being reduced to a docile placeholder or corporate prop by letting crisis guide the shape of the discipline. Architecture must remain outwardly relevant, inwardly charged, and alive to the inescapable tensions of the world it helps build. This situates us within a formless zone of annihilation, underscoring our need for a critical framework capable of navigating such volatile political terrain.

In response, we ask architects, designers, and theorists grappling with these complexities: What are the formal implications of crisis?

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1   Edgar Morin, *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1999).

2   The US Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) and Canada's 1923 Chinese Immigration Act compelled many Chinese laborers to return to Kaiping, bringing accumulated wealth and hybrid building knowledge. See National Archives (US) and Parks Canada records.

3   Jonathan T. Wong, "Return Migration and the Architecture of Kaiping," *Journal of Chinese Diaspora Studies 12*, no. 2 (2020): 45–66.

4   Morin, *Homeland Earth*, 73.

5   Morin, 25–26.

6   Paul Valéry, "Crisis of the Mind" (1919), in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, Volume 10, ed. Jackson Mathews (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

7   Preston Scott Cohen and Robert Levit, "Architecture versus the Entropic City," in *Flash Art Volumes*, 002, "Crisis Formalism," April 2025, pp. 64–79.

Kaiping Diaolou Towers, Guangdong, China.
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