

THE MYTH OF AUTONOMY

NATHANIEL COLEMAN

Architecture, one would think, has its own validity. It needs no reference to any other discipline to make it “viable” or to “justify” its value. We might even question whether words like value or morals are applicable to an architectural style.¹

My point is very different from e.g. Eisenman’s idea that architecture is self-centered and only concerned with its own formal-compositional issues. Eisenman posits that architecture should throw off its concern with the world, abandon function and only concentrate on architectural form. [...] I am trying to formulate the overall rationality of the discipline that necessarily involves the integration of world-reference (function) and self-reference (form).²

In this article, the so-called ‘autonomy project in architecture’, as theorised by Ignasi de Solà-Morales (1942-2001); K. Michael Hays’s (b. 1952); Patrik Schumacher’s (b. 1961), of Zaha Hadid’s office; and Pier Vittorio Aureli (b. 1973) is interrogated. In particular, the main aim of this article is to reveal the project of autonomy in architecture as a myth, especially in relation to the parallel myth of an avant-garde (especially a neo-avant-garde) in architecture. However, it is important to underline that my interrogation of ‘the myth of autonomy’ has little to do with recent trends in anti-theory, for example as outlined by Jeremy Till (b. 1957) in his *Architecture Depends* (2009).

Ultimately, the aim of this article is to recover a critical-historical perspective that reveals the project of orthodox modern architecture eschewed by

autonomists as itself an earlier response to the same persisting disciplinary crisis that animates their efforts. Following on from this, Utopia is reintroduced as providing architects with a much more promising set of tools for redeeming architecture than autonomy ever could. As I will argue, the most significant contribution Utopia can make to architecture is to return the social and political to it, which also provides a way to resist the formalist pull of autonomy. Renewal of Utopia, and with it the social and political dimensions of architecture, inevitably reveal(s) autonomy as a myth invested primarily in the dissolution of just such a possibility. The great paradox of autonomy in architecture is that it is duplicitous, using the inevitable impurities of realization as a cover for impossible desires for purity as a means to liberate architecture from its obligation to communities. The apparent naiveté of the modernist project as one of engagement, as interpreted by architects such as Aldo van Eyck, is discarded in favor of disengagement as apparently the only *realistic* response.

OPPOSITIONS

In the introduction to *The Oppositions Reader* compilation he edited, Hays ruminates on why autonomy became such an important preoccupation of so many of the architect authors and theorists who contributed to *Oppositions* (1973-1984), the journal of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York City (1967-1984). However, he goes no further than raising the question, a move as provocative as it is frustrating:

For the essential contradictions between architecture's autonomy – its self-organization into a body of formal elements and operations that separate it from any place and time – and its contingency on, even determination by, historical forces beyond its control subsumes all the 'formal socio-cultural and political' concerns into an all embracing dialectic. The conflicts of formalism and determinism [...] seem almost symptomatic of a deeper [...] social pathology [... .] One should ask not whether architecture is autonomous, or whether it can willfully be made so, but rather how it can be that the question arises in the first place, what kind of situation allows for architecture to worry about itself to this degree.³

Despite leaving readers without a definitive response to his question, Hays does offer several takes on autonomy drawn from the pages of *Oppositions*. Even so, relatively convincing explanations for architects' turn inward, away from material reality and the perplexing burdens of their discipline, do exist. As the German philosopher of hope Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) and the Italian architectural historian and theorist of closure Manfredo Tafuri (1935-1994) have intimated, architecture as a 'work', akin to the

unique achievements of the fine arts, rather than as an industrially reproducible ‘product’ – as French sociologist and philosopher of *cracks* Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) asserted – is all but impossible under capitalism. The failures of orthodox modernism, in particular its ostensive social project and ultimate rejection of this, left architects without a program or project for architecture and the city. Ascribing this failure to Utopia also left them without the tools for thinking their way beyond capitalism and modernism. Although these phenomena are often presented as a new condition particular to the crisis of modernity after the Second World War, with the move toward autonomy seen as having taken a cue from the frontiers of visual and performing arts. However, this understanding deprives narratives of the terminal condition of orthodox modernity of a critical-historical perspective that might well reveal the project of modern architecture eschewed by autonomists as itself an earlier response to the same persisting disciplinary crises. Although Tafuri’s discussion of Piranesi in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* is very helpful in illuminating this predicament, to my mind, British architectural historian and theorist Joseph Rykwert’s (b. 1926) *The First Moderns* (1980) offers an even more lucid account of the shift in direction for the discipline suggested here. Indeed, Rykwert, who was awarded the 2014 Royal Institute of British Architects Gold Medal, pushes the origins of this shift slightly further back than Tafuri does, to the end of the Baroque and the period of the Rococo, in particular to Claude Perrault’s (1613-1688) conceptualization of ‘positive and arbitrary beauty’ – the division between the quantitative and qualitative in building. In light of the dramatic consequences of this, for Rykwert, the only way forward for the discipline of architecture is to recuperate its enduring vocation:

The nature of our responses to the world of artifacts, the way in which groups and communities appropriate space, occupies sociologists and anthropologists. And

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*we acknowledge these human scientists as important and wholly serious people. Yet their studies are, in the last reduction, almost inevitably problems of form. This book [The First Moderns, 1980] recalls a time when the architect's business was just that. Perhaps if there is to be a place for the architect's work within a future social fabric, he will need to learn how to deal with such problems again.*⁴

Rykwert leaves us with a challenge at the end of *The First Moderns*, rather than an answer: for architects to regain their lost place within the culture, they must reconnect with those aspects of their discipline that once ensured this. Although not explicitly stated, this clearly reveals the project of autonomy in architecture as a profound form of alienation that deprives buildings of many of its associations and topics. While Rykwert's reconstruction of the preconditions that have led to the current situation of the past forty to fifty years is decidedly wide-ranging, he does not exactly excavate the causes of this condition, which Tafuri is more comfortable doing. As such, the significant socio-political import of his argument is somewhat obscured. Perhaps the reason for this is that whereas Tafuri had lost all hope for architecture, Rykwert has remained optimistic, leaving it to those more pessimistic of his readers to intensify the polemic his work suggests.

Indeed, my consideration of autonomy in relation to architecture developed here is informed by the battle for an architectural soul (perhaps only my own) carried out – in spirit at least – in the triangulated space between the thinking of Tafuri, Lefebvre, and Rykwert.⁵

The tension that exists between Tafuri's theoretical world and Lefebvre's is a product of the friction between the former's conviction that the world system of capitalism is totally closed, and the latter's belief in the generative potential to be drawn through the cracks that always exist in that never quite totally closed system. Rykwert provides the third point of the triangle by being even more stalwartly optimistic than Lefebvre on the one hand, and unconvinced by Tafuri's pessimism on the other. Arguably, the play of architectural theory today continues to be carried out within the triangulated space created by the tensions identified above, even if it tends to be imagined as operating within the altogether less determinate spaces of *Collage City*, as conceived by architectural historian and theorist Colin Rowe (1920-1999), who, as Hays observes, suffered a, "deep disillusionment with the utopian mission of [modern] architecture."⁶ Actually, of the four theorists introduced just above, Rowe is the one who most believed, if only half-heartedly, that autonomy – as a using of things and not believing in them – alone could redeem Orthodox modern

architecture from its significant failings that came into view after World War II.

Tafuri was also committed to autonomy in architecture, but did not share Rowe's conviction that it could only be redeemed by formalism, which promised to quash its social and political content. Tafuri's conception of autonomy differs from Rowe's as fundamentally a critique of the tragedy of architecture under capitalist production. However, the inevitable self-indulgence of the autonomy project in architectural practice, especially as advanced by the New York Five architects in the 1960s and 1970s proved too much for Tafuri to take. Ultimately, he came to see the crisis of architecture as 'a crisis of ideology'. In light of this, he came to assert that architects are powerless to resist their capture within the system of capitalist production; as they are little more than technicians within a building industry, ensnared within the total closure of the capitalist/neoliberal system.

It is in confronting Tafuri's pessimism (valid as it might be) that the possibility of the counter-spaces suggested by Rykwert, and more emphatically theorized by Lefebvre really cannot be ignored. Rykwert's positivity, and, in particular, Lefebvre's stubborn optimism, furnishes compelling antidotes to Tafuri's resolute pessimism. As introduced above, Lefebvre could locate possibilities in even the most unpromising conditions of the same system described by Tafuri as total; precisely because Lefebvre believed that systemic closure is never as total as it might appear: cracks in the system can always be detected, which reveals the apparently impossible as actually possible, even across the scant moments that separate the two. Paradoxically, Tafuri's pessimism seems to me to have been, at least in part, an inevitable byproduct of the ultimately frustrated hopes he placed in autonomy, no matter how short-lived, while Lefebvre's work on space, in particular his determined optimism, would have

been impossible had he grounded his hopes for transformation, even his ideas on *autogestion* (self-management), in autonomy. The crypto-utopianism of Rykwert and the more overt utopianism of Lefebvre articulate an alternative to the project of autonomy that long ago lost its political edge as a form of resistance to the inevitable dissolution of the engaged cultural work of architecture when subsumed within the building industry as one of the most extreme forms of capitalist production.

Tafuri, Lefebvre, and even Rykwert share serious doubts about the architect as expert, or advocate, or as guardian of some imagined “communal imaginary” (at least in the present), rendering such a view difficult to sustain, unless the conventional professional mythologies of the architect are left unchallenged. Although Tafuri and Lefebvre shared a relative suspicion about autonomy and the avant-garde alike, what separates them are their respective ideas on the degree to which the total closure of the given condition is actually final. As such, they differed on the relative value of Utopia as well.

In contradistinction to its reputation, Utopia is bound up with the real world on the ground (at least in Lefebvre’s conception of it, and my own). As such, Utopia offers real possibilities for overcoming given conditions without exiting the everyday. Indeed, Utopia is actually nearly always about the everyday. But Utopia permits us to act on the everyday, and even exit given conditions, without necessitating the delusion of either autonomy or a fictional avant-garde to imagine transformative alterity. The otherness of Utopia is always about return as well – the exit is necessary to re-imagine the present that will be transformed. Ultimately, concrete, or constitutive, Utopias mount a challenge to autonomy in architecture, to the repetition compulsion of neo-avant-gardes without a cause as well. The alternatives that Utopia posits enlivens history and renews tradition by being a ‘handing over’ rather than a ‘handing down’: Utopia imagines how the past can be surrendered to the future by way of renewed – reimagined – tradition.

Reading autonomy through Utopia, as I am doing here raises a paradox by which Utopia (in the way I understand it) although so commonly presented as impossibility or no place, inevitably problematizes the myth of architectural autonomy. By returning the social and political to architecture, Utopia provides a way around the formalist pull of autonomy while retaining the hope of freedom in the distanced space it articulates, which autonomy must negate. The space of utopian thought, though located elsewhere in space or in time, is always situated in the present as a critical appraisal of and alternative to it. In this way, Utopia can never be autonomous, as its engagement with the context it attempts

to transform is always dialogical, interweaving self and other, individual and society.

Autonomy must ultimately take the form of a myth – in art as in life – because all works – especially architecture – and all people are always already embedded within a wider web of associations, primarily social. In this way, autonomy in architecture is arguably above all else a fairytale remarkably well-suited to transforming ideologies of freedom, individualism, and neoliberalism into a myth, a self-soothing story that perpetuates the illusion of agency (particularly evident in the endless cycles of aimless neo-avant-gardes in architecture). Considered in this way, the shape autonomy has taken in architectural theory and practice as formalism begins to make sense, especially in the form of spatializations of disconnectedness from the social and political in architecture that autonomy entails.

As developed immediately above, what I am proposing here might well seem to be at odds with framing the question of autonomy in a traditionally Kantian way. For Kant, autonomy is to be valued as a form of ethical understanding, in the sense that it presupposes some rational will. As noted Kant expert Paul Guyer notes,

*Above all, Kant was the philosopher of human autonomy, the view that by the use of our own reason in its broadest sense human beings can discover and live up to the basic principles of knowledge and action without outside assistance, above all without divine support or intervention.*⁷

I am unconvinced that life on the ground bears this out as a real possibility. While such a belief may be seductive, how many people actually act in accordance with their own moral duty (or even their own best interests, rather than apparent self interest) independent of a web of social relations?

Although autonomy in practice in architecture might be explained as the (morally) laudable effort

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to act ‘without outside assistance’, architecture is not philosophy, at least not in the sense that permits the purity of argumentation in isolation from concrete experience and practices on the ground. So while arguments in philosophy might need not be troubled by the way in which the mundane inevitably taints practice, as architects we are so deeply embedded in the world that attempting to claim any such luxury is at best a misapprehension. Inevitably, as architects, only if we are vigilant in attending to just how infrequently any of us actually act in our own best interest, or on behalf of the communities to which we belong, will we have any hope of acting in remotely ethical ways. It is in this regard that autonomy as individualism (and as willful disengagement), inevitably suggests just the sort of isolation associated with formalism. Intriguingly, the idea of freedom that best describes a wide range of autonomy projects in architecture is transcendental (in the sense of being *a priori* or preternatural), rather than empirical (in the sense of being experiential or pragmatic).⁸ In this regard, perhaps the opposition ought to be more simply stated as the ‘pure’ as opposed to the ‘impure’, which in terms of Utopia could be indicated as the difference between the ‘abstract’ (transcendental) and the ‘concrete (empirical). However, for these differences to have dialectical value, in terms of defining an alternative idea of freedom with regard to architecture, the concrete, empirical, or pragmatic would need to be thought of as far more nuanced than technocratic understandings of them usually permit.

K. MICHAEL HAYS

Influenced by philosophical post-structuralism in their responses to the failures of architects’ flirtations with positivist social science that so marked the orthodox modernism of the post World War II period, a fair number of the generation of architects reaching maturity post-1968 set for themselves the task, as Hays has put it, of ‘thinking architecture back into its own.’ Interestingly, this group’s prevailing conception of *architecture’s own* imagined it as domain of practice free of social obligation and unfettered by the habits of culture, of comprehensibility and of the everyday. Arguably, this fantasy of a *pure architecture* remains dominant, or at least prevails as an aspiration for practice, what Hays calls the ‘autonomy project.’⁹ Given the association of high-modern, or orthodox-modern architecture with Utopia, most of the post-1968 generation of architects wants to be as post-utopian as they are autonomous; indeed, many are categorically anti-utopian.

According to Hays’s reading (and that of other chroniclers) of

autonomy, architects as divergent as Aldo Rossi and Peter Eisenman, or Bernard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas, and Zaha Hadid (amongst others) share a suspicion of architectural sincerity of the sort Aldo van Eyck detailed until his death in 1999, and which Rykwert continues to encourage. The counter-projects of still practicing architects as diverse as Tadao Ando, Deborah Berke, David Chipperfield, Herman Hertzberger, Renzo Piano, Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, and Peter Zumthor come to mind. Paradoxically, the first group attempt to escape Utopia by way of inventing architectures in which some relative perfection is achievable, whereas the second group transacts in the transformative potential of hope, while embracing hints at fallibility as a crucial humanizing characteristic (yes, arguably even Ando, Zumthor, and Chipperfield).

Consciously or otherwise, I believe this tension reveals some sort of awareness (in both camps) that autonomy is preternatural, only possible outside of the realm of “time and necessity” (as Alberti observed), or “place and occasion” (as van Eyck observed). Equally, as John Ruskin long ago asserted (and Le Corbusier practiced) perfection is reserved for the unknown or unknowable, or is achievable only when the problem is so reduced, or the aims set low enough, that it can be attained. Confirming this interpretation, Hays argues that the “autonomy project” entails freeing “architecture from the burden of utility” necessarily so in “recognition of the impossibility, or failure of meaning” for an architecture inexorably compromised by its capture within the building industry that realization ironically exacerbates. It is for this reason that autonomists like Hays are not particularly interested in the actual reception of built works. Only theories and theoretical (or visionary) projects have any chance of freedom from the burden of use and the destructive consequences of the capitalist production of building. In Hays’s view, architecture, in, “any traditional sense, such as van

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Eyck proposed,” is irredeemably lost, ostensibly leaving autonomy as the only *authentic* response.¹⁰

The troubling thing about the supposedly authentic response of autonomy is that it requires emptiness, or meaninglessness, for its achievement. As an example of this, consider Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co’s assessment of Louis I Kahn’s work:

[T]he new bases for architecture set up by Kahn are every bit as artificial as the myths and institutions in which he put his trust [...]. It is nostalgia that determines Kahn’s language. That determinism breaks with the modern tradition no less violently than does every attempt to confine it in the display cases of a museum. Kahn’s work inveighs against the reduction of architecture to a negligible object.

But this signifies protecting the values from the process of history by transfiguring them into symbols, by attempting to recover their arcane properties.¹¹

While I might experience Kahn’s work as an audacious attempt to recuperate social meaning and comprehensibility in modern architecture, Tafuri and Dal Co necessarily see it as confirmation of a *false consciousness*, in the sense that it is an attempt to resist the, ‘reduction of architecture to a negligible object,’ as an inevitable consequence of capitalist production and the flows of history. In Tafuri and Dal Co’s terms, although resistance of this sort might be possible because it exists, it is *false* – a myth – in the sense of misleading us as regards the material, ideological and institutional processes of capitalist society. The significance of this is that, in Marxist terms, those conditions could only ever be overcome if nothing diverts attention from the reality of our circumstances under capitalism. While I have great sympathy for this position, I remain unconvinced by the prospect of autonomy – of a socially and politically empty architecture that retreats from reality and the everyday, as much as from Utopia – as the way to set the stage for what Ernst Bloch called “true architecture” that will only ever be possible when architecture emerges from the, “hollow space of capitalism.”¹² Although this might make me into a utopian socialist who encourages piecemeal attempts to willfully act upon history out of step with its flows, rather than a scientific socialist, Deleuze and Guattari argue that, “[w]hat matters is not the supposed distinction between utopian and scientific socialism but the different types of utopia, one of them being revolution.”¹³ In my estimation, as practiced, autonomy is not a revolution but rather a restoration of sorts in the sense that an empty architecture, whatever its claims to resistance, is an architecture fully coincident with the processes of the capitalist production of buildings. Without the edge of Utopia, of a sustained critique of the present that seeks to transform it,

architecture is just another product to be exchanged.

By the same measure, the *autonomy project* of architecture is compensatory; a sad response to architects' diminished authority and reduced influence within the building industry of capitalist production, effected through a reduction of the tasks of architecture primarily to formal or typological concerns. Thus, the autonomy project is less *liberation* than *requiem*.

Couched as a form of resistance to the dominance of capitalist production, autonomy in architecture is more convincingly a symptom of the very condition it purports to resist. In point of fact, autonomy in architecture constructs an apologia for solipsism, radical individualism, self-indulgence, and a negation of the social and other external forces that shape architecture and which it shelters, to say nothing of the web of associations of which it is part. Clearly, nothing could be more consistent with the logic of products. Though I feel closer in spirit to Lefebvre and Rykwert, this pessimistic conclusion is closer to Tafuri, who, as Hays observes, "found architecture in a double bind. To the extent that architecture can function in a capitalist society, it inevitably reproduces the structure and codes of that society in its own immanent logics and form."¹⁴ Escape becomes capture, suggesting that the choice is between either capitulation or transformation, rather than between determinism or autonomy. Summarizing Tafuri, Hays notes: "When architecture resists, when it attempts to reassert its own disruptive voice, capitalism simply withdraws from service, relegates it to the boudoir, so that demonstrations by architects of their works' autonomy and degraded life become redundant and trivialized in advance."¹⁵ Indeed, for Tafuri, the, "*return to pure architecture,*" that capitalism necessitates, is little more than a return, "*to form without utopia [...] to sublime uselessness.*"¹⁶

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For Ignasi de Solà-Morales (1942-2001), the autonomy project really begins to take shape in the aftermath of the rebellions of 1968. For him, in its present form, this condition is describable as, “our present panorama of incertitude and desolation.”¹⁷ Indeed, the self-absorption suggested by the very desire for an autonomous architecture arguably only becomes a preoccupation in periods of crisis, or of “pessimism.”¹⁸ In Morales’s view autonomy entails, “the disappearance of all reference to anything beyond the universe of artistic products’ themselves.”¹⁹ What is more, “the idea’ is put ‘before the materiality of the object [...]. The process is more important than the work of art. More important than the finished, isolated object are the ideas [that] made it possible.”²⁰ Although for Morales the preceding describes what he calls “plastic arts,” a similar condition exists for architecture, in which its autonomy is “based on the body of theory intrinsic to it.”²¹ In a passage that highlights the limitations of thinking of theories and projects as autonomous from construction – from the built reality of building – Morales describes the experience of visiting a constructed building designed by Italian architect Aldo Rossi (1941-1997), as opposed to the genuine pleasure of seeing his drawings and other representations:

*The sense of disillusion experienced by many upon seeing a Rossi building constructed on an actual site and from concrete materials derives from the fact that the building thus asks to be considered objectively or functionally, while its author tries to call instead to the process revealed in his drawings, so that the construction of the building is an episode in an architectonic discourse understood as autonomous and thus indifferent to construction or use.*²²

In such work, including that of the architects Peter Eisenman (b. 1932), Michael Graves (b. 1934), Richard Meier (b. 1934), John Hejduk (1929-2000), and Charles Gwathmey (1938-2009) considered in the 1971 book the *New York Five*, “[t]he idea, defined by sketches, not by built work overtakes the importance of the ‘real thing.’”²³ The desire for ‘the autonomy of the discipline’ of architecture is a symptom of, “the failure of modern architecture,” that apparently joins this grouping of architects together.²⁴ As described by Morales, the architecture of autonomy is characterized by, “the evocation of impossible architectures, of ruins, of spatial absurdities, and of conceptual paradoxes,” indicative of a, “loss of confidence in the possibility of a truly buildable and culturally valid architecture.”²⁵ The internalized work of autonomist architects is, “concerned purely with syntax [the composition or arrangement of architectural elements]: semantics [the meaning of architectural elements that emerges from assemblages of

them, and from their metaphoric power] constitute not so much a goal to be reached as a point from which to depart.”²⁶ Here, Morales returns our attention to the association between autonomy and a draining away of culturally associative content in architecture, in response to the crisis of architecture (and modernity) as a crisis of meaning and ideology, and as a symptom of the capitalist production of buildings.

PIER VITTORIO AURELI (B. 1973) – THE PROJECT OF AUTONOMY

For Aureli, the key aim of what he calls “the project of autonomy” is to intensify the difference between “present thinking” and “past thinking.” In this sense, “autonomy” is that process by which the apparent uniqueness of the present can know itself as distinct from the past and from tradition, even if both become tropes that autonomists “mess” with. However, while Aureli is interested in autonomy as a project of international architectural culture in general, his main preoccupation is with emphasizing its Italian origins and the multiplicity of expressions within that context, which is to say, that while it might be convenient to identify Aldo Rossi with Tafuri, for Aureli they are different in the way that Rowe and Eisenman are. Although the subtlety of this might be elusive, it is surely reasonable to argue that historian/theorists (Tafuri and Rowe) will be different from practitioner/theorists (Rossi and Eisenman). At the very least, the former could make a much more convincing claim to autonomy than the latter: history and theory exist in the realm of texts, which are much less costly or risky to produce than buildings are. On the other hand, architecture is always implicated in the dominant culture and bound to its modes of production. As such, the construction of architecture always renders it already far too compromised – by association – to lay any claim to autonomy of any substantive sort. It is precisely

this compromised position that implementation foists upon architecture that encouraged a range of autonomists to initially turn away from making buildings toward the construction of theories and representations. However, even these activities, in particular the crafting of supposedly autonomous representations, are quickly subsumed within the logic of the provision of products and of consumption. The beautiful representations of architect theorists may have been free of the ‘burden of use’ because they could, or would, never be constructed, but this did not inoculate them from quickly becoming objects of exchange, far from autonomous in any convincing sense. One need only think of the importance of the Leo Castelli Gallery in SoHo New York City in this regard during the 1970s and early 1980s. Many architects’ reputations were made, and building careers ultimately launched, on the basis of first producing apparently autonomous representations. It is in this regard, as Aureli observes that “capitalism evolves to disarm [...] resistance.”²⁷

Aureli’s argument, it is worth noting, obtains to a small architectural elite that is not representative of architecture as generally practiced. Nor does his argument particularly relate to the individuals who conventionally populate buildings. Indeed, this is likely the point: autonomy of any sort that actually proceeds to some real form of resistance presupposes isolation from the mainstream. It is in this regard that autonomy is countercultural, which ostensibly confirms it as a critical practice of a sort. Though only for so long as it is not named as a style or consumed as one. The near impossibility of actually achieving this turns on the duration of the cycles of style that autonomy is part of having – paradoxically – become shorter and shorter since the 1970s. Although Aureli offers something of a history of autonomy in architecture – from the 1960s onward – with an emphasis on Italian currents, it seems to me that the main aim of his project is to locate, or more precisely, to carve out, a place for his own practice by laying claim to an inheritance from the Italian Autonomists, in the belief that this would actually make practice – his own – possible in the midst of capitalist production. Thus, his observations about the convictions of the Autonomists appear to mirror his own hopes:

*[The Autonomists’ Project was] not about the destruction of capitalist culture and bourgeois history per se but, on the contrary, [it was rather about] their deep analysis and instrumental use. Autonomy was not the creation of politics and poetics ex nihilo but rather an audacious effort to appropriate the political realm in order to construct an alternative to capitalist domination.*²⁸

The peculiar thing about Aureli’s reading, or perhaps of the strain of autonomy he is interested in, is that its aims are, according to him,

“postpolitical” rather than “political”, which to me seems a sure recipe for failure.²⁹ Clearly, attempting to act upon capitalist production in some postpolitical manner comes just a bit too close to the myths of the end of history that underpin the neoliberal project today. However, in telling the story in this way, Aureli brings us close to a truer condition, that of melancholia, of a sense of exhaustion and despondency in the face of the apparent failure and defeat of communism, and of the Left more generally, particularly in their inability to offer up a compelling alternative to the entrepreneurial spirit and chameleon-like wiles of capitalism. Indeed, in Aureli’s view Autonomy’s target was not so much capitalism as it was communism and the Left, in the belief that through the antagonism of autonomy, capitalism could be transformed (somehow from within). But how this could be achieved – disengaged from politics – remains a mystery. Nevertheless, Aureli is clear: he wants to, “attempt to extract from [the] history [of the project of Autonomy] what is still valid today.”³⁰ Achieving this clearly presents a significant problem in a context where autonomy suggests a particular attitude, or style, as much as a retreat from many of the multiple problems that make up architecture, for example, encounters with place and use. Ultimately, for Aureli, by the time the autonomy project in architecture was exported to the Anglo-American context it arrived as an already spent force, suggesting aesthetic innovations of a formalist sort, rather than any radical political initiative. As such, the very conditions of extreme commercial production that autonomy professed to counter quickly consumed it within its own capitalist logic. Nevertheless, Aureli looks to, “autonomia as a way to establish long-term responsibilities and solid categories by which to counter the positivistic and mystifying ways that social and political development comes to be seen as evolutionary progress.”³¹ While I certainly agree with the necessity of doing just this, the “autonomy

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project” in architecture must inevitably turn-in on itself to become both self-justifying and self-indulgent, little more than a compensation for the near impossibility of socially rich and significant architectural practise with the reach of capitalism. Ultimately, the myth of the autonomy project maintains the status quo by which Utopia must still be renounced, including the commitment to transformation it speaks, and the real social and political engagement it requires. In this renunciation, the architect can also maintain his or her fiction of some special status in the making and remaking of the world, despite all of the evidence to the contrary that persistently debunks this myth.

PATRIK SCHUMACHER

Patrik Schumacher, who teaches at the Architectural Association in London, is a director in the office of Zaha Hadid Architects; his prominence in UK architectural education and position in Hadid’s office, as representative of so-called *starchitect* practises, are the key reasons for considering his take on the autonomy of architecture here. The main shortcoming of Schumacher’s writing on architecture is that to make his point he presumes an either/or situation of either grand master narratives, or none. As such, his argument is totalizing and lacks subtlety. His tone suggests that the current system of cultural production really is as closed as the absolute fragmentation he posits would ensure. He associates master narratives with the social renewal projects of Utopia, evident, according to him, in the urban projects of orthodox modern architecture. Overcoming master narratives, with a putative realism, entails, as with most autonomists, doing away with Utopia. According to Schumacher, the current condition reveals, “the all too evident impossibility of designing a new world,” not least, he argues, because the current condition, “indicates how far utopia has been left behind.” In this regard, Schumacher observes, “two related tendencies that conspire to frustrate any straightforward utopian impulse within architecture and design: 1. The dissolution of the utopian politico-cultural discourses of emancipation and social progress [...]” And, “2. The increasing autonomy and self-referential closure of the discipline of architecture, as expressed [...] in the [...] work and writings of Peter Eisenman.” He continues, “while [i]t might seem that [...] architecture withdraws into itself because no compelling social project exists that could inspire and direct architectural speculation [...], there is another way one could theorise the relationship between these two phenomena.”³² On the basis of the argument developed in the preceding pages of the present article, by this juncture it should come as no surprise that my conviction

is that the withdrawal of architecture into itself is indeed a symptom of having, “no compelling social project,” to, “inspire and direct architectural speculation.”

In Schumacher’s view:

[t]he tendency towards architectural autonomy might be understood as a moment of an overall societal process of differentiation, whereby social communication fragments into a series of autonomous domains – the economy, politics, the legal system, science, art etc. – establishing self-referentially closed subsystems within society. Each of these autonomous discourses contributes, in its specific way, to the overall social process. But this overall social process – society – does no longer have any control centre over and above the various increasingly autonomous communication systems. The differentiated discourses establish their own sovereign independence with respect to their underlying values, performance criteria, programmes and priorities. In this sense the various subsystems operate self-referentially [...] in a kind of self-referentially enclosed autonomy.³³

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According to Schumacher, such fragmentation is to be welcomed precisely because the condition of autonomy facilitates, “the ability to experiment with adaptations to a turbulent environment on many local fronts simultaneously, without the need to synchronise all moves, and without running the risk that failures rip too deep into the social fabric.”³⁴ Moreover, his belief is that such fragmentation protects architecture because, “design rationality too can neither be reduced to nor controlled by any other than its own logic.”³⁵

Schumacher’s discourse depends on a large degree of overconfidence in the supposed logic of his statements. Nowhere is this arrogance more pronounced than in his naïve and out-of-date statements on Utopia that are, admittedly, fairly typical of primitive understandings of the concept, and which stubbornly persist in architecture theory:

The self-referential closure of the differentiated subsystems of societal communication spells the end of utopia. Utopia as a coherent project and blueprint, i.e. as the wholesale reinvention of society integrating politics, law, economy and architecture, breaks up in the face of an insurmountable complexity barrier [...]. Today society has no address, no centre and no opportunity to generate a binding representation of itself and its destiny.³⁶

The preceding begs the question as to whether or not Utopia must be *blueprint* to articulate *reinvention*. An alternative position arising from within the discipline of utopian studies and beyond is that the *blueprint* Utopia is just one, albeit unfortunate, utopian possibility amongst others. Examples of these alternatives include “Utopia as method” as Ruth Levitas understands it, as a way of thinking about and working toward the “possible-impossible” as Henri Lefebvre described it, or the taking of the first resolute, though by no means certain, steps toward the realization of alternatives that would be “constitutive” rather than “pathological”(of a blueprint utopian sort), in Paul Ricoeur’s sense.³⁷

Amongst the many peculiar aspects of Schumacher’s thinking is his conviction that:

[a] mark of the self-referential closure of architecture is that design decisions are tightly knit to their kind and only obliquely/indirectly [...] refer to external demands and circumstances [...]. Political, legal or financial concerns are not immediately architectural concerns.³⁸

The sheltered vision of architecture this encourages only serves to further separate architecture from the everyday and to absolve architects of their obligation to communities and individuals. As construed by Schumacher, autonomy liberates architects to a space of unobstructed self involvement of an “art-for-art’s-sake” sort which only confirms the disconnect between architects and their architecture from everyday life while contributing to the transformation of buildings and cities into little more than a collection of branded commodities. As with so many architects, Schumacher’s ultimate defense for such a disconnected view of architecture is the cultural capital that attaches to some imagined association with a putative avant-garde:

The distinction of avant-garde versus mainstream, merely commercial “architecture”, remains constitutive for the discipline. Only innovative, generalisable contributions [...] that are deeply entangled in the autopoietic network of architectural communication [are considered]. The degree of autonomy that architectural discourse has established by differentiating itself from the immediacy of everyday talk about buildings [...] should grow with the overall complexity of society.³⁹

Although Tafuri could see only false consciousness – and certain failure – in attempts to *act upon history*, when *acting within history* is seen as the only possible option, the risk is that the results will be as self-serving as they are anti-utopian. But what other possibility could there be if attempts to act upon history are seen as being out of step with its flow, and thus supposedly doomed? Moreover, if *acting within history* entails doing away with Utopia, *acting upon history* is fundamentally utopian. Resigning oneself to history as determinant also risks becoming self-serving by absolving architects from being critical and acting critically. This conundrum leads me to a passage from Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?*, with which I would like to conclude, as I believe it captures many of the strands I have been developing in this paper while helping us to imagine how to reconcile our desires for freedom with our simultaneous capture within webs of social association, by way of Utopia:

Actually, utopia is what links philosophy with its own epoch, with European capitalism, but also already with the Greek city. In each case it is with utopia that philosophy becomes political and takes the criticism of its own time to its highest point. Utopia does not split off from infinite movement; etymologically it stands for absolute deterritorialization but always at the critical point at which it is connected with the present relative milieu [...]. In utopia (as in philosophy) there is always the risk of a restoration, and sometimes a proud affirmation, of transcendence, so that we need to distinguish between authoritarian utopias, or utopias of transcendence, and immanent, revolutionary, libertarian utopias [...]. The word utopia therefore designates that conjunction of philosophy, or of the concept, with the present milieu – political philosophy [...].⁴⁰

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The quote above establishes an apparently irresolvable paradox for architecture: if the autonomy project in all of its myriad guises actually reveals an attempt to be free of Utopia, it is precisely this self-deceiving attempt at escape that renders architecture irrelevant and ensures its conclusive separation from culture – in Adolf Loos’s sense – and from everyday life. Conversely, it seems, then, that Utopia holds out a potential resolution to the problem of renewed purpose and relevance for architecture, fortifying it to act against the solvent of capitalism, the very same condition that inspired most of the doomed attempts at architectures of autonomy in the first place.

ENDNOTES

1. Philip Johnson, “Where Are We At?”, *Architectural Review*, CXXVII, September 1960, pp. 173–75, reprinted in *Philip Johnson Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 100.
2. Thomas Schumacher, “On Parametricism: Georgina Day interviews Patrik Schumacher” (2012), available at http://www.patrikschumacher.com/Texts/On%20Parametricism_.html
3. K. Michael Hays, ‘Introduction’, *Oppositions Reader* (New York City, Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), p. ix.
4. Joseph Rykwert, *The First Moderns: The Architects of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980), p. 470.
5. For more on Tafuri, Lefebvre, and Rykwert see N. Coleman, *Utopias and Architecture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), and Nathaniel Coleman, *Lefebvre for Architects* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015). I have also considered the importance of Tafuri, Lefebvre, and Rykwert, as outlined here, in numerous journal articles.
6. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
7. Paul Guyer, “Kant, Immanuel”, in E. Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (London: Routledge 1998/2004), retrieved June 16, 2014, from <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/DB047>
8. See Paul Guyer, “Kant on the Theory and Practice of Autonomy”, *Social Philosophy and Policy* 20.2 (July 2003), pp. 70-98, here p. 98.
9. K. Michael Hays, “The Textualization of Architecture, 1978–1986” (talk presented as plenary speaker at Text & Architecture, An International Word & Image Conference, Paris, 26–28 June 2003, organized by the University of Paris, 7 Denis-Diderot/College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA, 26

June 2003).

10. K. Michael Hays, “Textualization”, *ibid.*

11. Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1976), p. 402.

12. Ernst Bloch, “Building in Empty Spaces”, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Zipes and F. Mecklenburg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 187-190.

13. Deleuze and Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

14. Hays, “Introduction”, *Oppositions Reader*, p. xiv.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (1973), trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), p. ix.

17. Ignasi de Solà-Morales, “From Autonomy to Untimeliness” (1991), in *Differences: Topographies of Contemporary Architecture*, trans. Graham Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 73.

18. Ignasi de Solà-Morales, *ibid.*, p. 73.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

27. Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture Within and Against Capitalism* (New York City: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), p. 9.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

29. Ibid., pp. 9-11.

30. Ibid., p. 12.

31. Ibid., p. 83.

32. Patrik Schumacher, "The Autopoeisis of Architecture", in *LATENT UTOPLAS - Experiments within Contemporary Architecture* (Vienna/New York: Springer Verlag, 2002). Available online at: <http://www.patrikschumacher.com/Texts/Autopoeisis.htm>. Interested readers are encouraged to see also an earlier treatment of Schumacher's thinking on Utopia and contemporary architecture in my article 'Utopia Beyond Amelioration', *Boundaries* 8 (April-June 2013), 4-11.

33. Schumacher, "Autopoeisis".

34. Ibid

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. See Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Nathaniel Coleman, "Utopia and a New Romanticism", in *Lefebvre for Architects* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 18-52; and Nathaniel Coleman, in *Utopias and Architecture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 10-11, 29, 38-39, 52, 56-62, 237-38.

38. Patrik Schumacher, "The Autopoeisis of Architecture," in *LATENT UTOPLAS - Experiments within Contemporary Architecture* (Vienna/New York: Springer Verlag, 2002). Available online at: <http://www.patrikschumacher.com/Texts/Autopoeisis.htm>.

39. Patrik Schumacher, *ibid.*

40. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* [1991], trans. G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 99-100.