

THE ABSURD ALIBI

THEORY

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ABSTRACT - Generated from a discussion at the Fall 2015 ACSA Conference in Syracuse, New York, this article tackles the very topic of the conference ("Between Autonomous and Contingent Objects of Architecture"). It reflects on projects of autonomy (new and old) asking what they contribute to architecture as a discipline and profession. What, if anything, is at stake in such projects? It discusses some contemporary examples of autonomous and object-oriented theories of architecture. While autonomy originally posed a radical challenge to ways architecture was made and reasoned, this article contends that the critical energy generated with that challenge has been exhausted and replaced with disengaged copies of earlier experiments. It is unclear what insights these newer versions provide to architectural discourse. This article further conjectures that the socio-economic context in which autonomy re-emerges today is fundamentally altered leaving its advocates in a much more precarious position than the exponents of previous iterations of architectural autonomy. It concludes that notions of architectural autonomy are an absurd alibi, incommensurate with a discipline so constrained by social and economic expectations as architecture.

Keywords: architecture, autonomy, contingency, discipline, theory

Sometimes what is remarkable about a debate is not the intricacies of the positions articulated or the strength of the particular arguments, but the persistence of the discussion itself. While the context and the players change, the logic and terms of their respective arguments remain startlingly constant. The debate between autonomous and contingent objects of architecture is one which continually resurfaces. More remarkable still is that in a field as interdisciplinary and influenced by social and economic expectations as architecture, the search for a so-called state of architectural autonomy endures.

Derived from Kantian aesthetics, disciplinary autonomy was originally conceived as a political critique resistant to the preexisting cultural order. It went on to take many forms between different thinkers and disciplines. In architecture, autonomy was characterized by a critical disciplinary stance, tended to be academic, and had an affinity for theory.

Contingency, on the other hand, was inter- or extra-disciplinary. It dealt with the "real" world, and was aligned with practice. By the 1990s, the premise of architectural autonomy was seriously challenged for ignoring a range of contextual forces and underlying systems of organization. Architects began thinking in terms of flows, patterns, and fields rather than disciplinarity, composition, and objects.¹ Critics of autonomy further suggested the ineffectiveness and vanity of autonomy in the face of tremendous economic, technological, and social pressures.

Recent work, however, resuscitates some of the earlier concerns associated with the project of autonomy. Attentiveness to the inner world of architectural objects can be seen in opposition to preponderance of projects investigating organizational fields, ecological systems, landscape urbanism, identity, and social justice. After years of questioning the possibility of a critical architecture and exploring non-disciplinary issues, has the discursive pendulum begun to swing back in favor of architectural autonomy?² If so, why is this case?

This article reflects on these questions arguing that the notion of autonomy is one which is necessarily fraught and difficult to sustain. While it originally posed a radical challenge to ways architecture was made and reasoned, this article contends that that critical energy has been exhausted and replaced with disengaged copies of earlier experiments. Though made using digital tools not available to previous generations, it is unclear what insights these newer versions provide to architectural discourse. This article further conjectures that the socio-economic context in which autonomy re-emerges today is fundamentally altered, thus leaving its advocates in a much more precarious position than the exponents of previous iterations of architectural autonomy.

Upon closer inspection, the bipolar relationship established between autonomy and contingency ultimately proves to be a weak one. Reflecting on the possibility of autonomous and contingent objects in architecture, it soon becomes apparent that embracing only one side of this either/or battle is something akin to a sentimentalized fantasy or hardheaded ideological dogmatism. Each end of the autonomy-contingency spectrum is guided by its own assumptions, values, and carefully-crafted myths. Unfortunately, well-intentioned proponents on both sides of the debate have become hucksters with elaborate alibis for justifying their respective positions. In reality, these two positions are necessarily intertwined and dependent upon each other. Like the relationship between modernity and tradition in which modernity needs to invent something called tradition in order to more clearly define itself, autonomy needs contingency in order to more clearly claim its disciplinary identity and demarcate its disciplinary boundary. In short, autonomy and contingency are mutually constituted views of architecture.

Regardless of the position espoused, it should be noted that the terms of this debate often unnecessarily prioritize “objects” over other concerns. For example, the Fall 2015 ACSA Conference at Syracuse University was billed as a debate “Between the Autonomous and Contingent Object”.³ By focusing on objects rather than architectural space, fields, or images, for example, this framing lost sight of the fundamentally relational and processual qualities of architecture. Architecture necessarily exists as a process located between these constructed poles. It lives between the discipline’s inside or core and the zone deemed to be the discipline’s

outside.⁴ Vitruvius recognized this complex transaction when he wrote about the relationship between theory and practice centuries ago in his foundational text *On Architecture*. In Book 1 he writes, “Practice is the continuous and regular exercise of employment where manual work is done with any necessary material according to the design of a drawing. Theory, on the other hand, is the ability to demonstrate and explain the productions of dexterity on the principles of proportion.”⁵ Though a foundational text to the discipline, it understands that architectural thought, even at its core, cannot be separated from its necessary material. Theory and practice are inextricably linked. Similarly, Stan Allen writes of architecture as a material practice—“working in and among the world of things—an instrumental practice capable of transforming reality.”⁶

Despite this reasoning, calls for disciplinary autonomy persist. Recent manifestations of the return to objects have taken many forms. The Rem Koolhaas-curated Venice Biennale focused on architecture’s “fundamentals”. Though often seen as one of the fiercest critics of autonomy, the exhibition’s focus on architectural components not typically studied in architecture was read by Peter Eisenman as Koolhaas’ announcement of “the end of everything, the end of architecture.”⁷ The emphasis on objects signals a shift from previous decades’ system and field fixation.

Patrik Schumacher’s parametric manifesto argues for the *autopoiesis*, or disciplinary self-making of architecture. Citing Alberti’s *De re aedificatoria* he aims to achieve an “all-encompassing theoretical systematization” of architecture that offers its own inwardly focused self-description.⁸ This project of autonomy, while different in many ways from the project of Manfredo Tafuri or Peter Eisenman, maintains that there “can be no external determination imposed upon architecture—neither by political bodies, nor by paying clients.”⁹

Another expression of the contemporary shift to disciplinary autonomy and objects can be found in the provocative work of David Ruy. Informed by the speculative realist philosophy of Graham Harman, Ruy questions the fixation on contingency and reliance on what he and Harman call “relationism”. He reasons that “relationism leaves no room for conditions in excess of those relations (by its own definition), and therefore provides an inadequate account of how change comes about.”¹⁰ Ruy questions the tendency to think of architecture as a consequence of its context advocating instead a return to “strange objects”. Claiming the dissolution of the discipline of architecture to outside forces is a “self-inflicted wound” which undercuts the authority of the architect, he instead suggests attempting to “discover the secret reality behind the curtain of appearances.”¹¹

While still recognizing the discursive merit of these investigations, this article is positioned strongly on one side of the autonomy-contingency dialectical framework. Though, as related earlier, it’s understood that

such a position is not a dichotomous choice between two rigid options. It is instead a complex feedback between these poles which constitutes the cultural production of architecture. This article, however, is not a settling of a cheery middle ground, or a colonization of a negotiated terrain, but sticks to the ACSA Conference's Fox News-like distinctions of autonomous and contingent, critical and post-critical, good and evil. It is a commentary on a contemporary condition. While not explicitly pro-contingency, my position in this article is decidedly *anti-autonomy*. It questions the possibility that such a condition could actually exist, but moreover asks what is gained by marshaling autonomy for architectural ends. Perhaps ironically, and considering the historical development of the term, this is actually a "critical" position.

Once the panelists for this discussion had been convened, we were asked to ponder the following motion:

With a return to the well of figural form, have any of the inconsistencies or limitations of past autonomous form-making informed the seemingly infinite variability of today's shapes and figures? Are we still on the same road or is it really different this time?

In response, it is my position that autonomy has and always will be an absurd alibi in the discipline of architecture which is, at its very heart, a social-material practice. Even the most autonomously conceived object is exposed to the contamination of the messy facts of reality. Architecture simply isn't and never has been a lab experiment where all of the variables you want can be eliminated from the overall equation. The impure constraints of the world shape a project more viscerally than the artificially conceived and seemingly "pure" constraints of the discipline.

An alibi is an excuse, or defense to avoid blame in a crime. Architecture, ultimately has very little control over how it is received by the world out there. The vacuum-like premise of autonomy is incompatible with that world. It is a romantic fantasy of the Howard Roark type that can only be talked about and attempted by a privileged class of individuals. The architectural project of autonomy was originally premised as a radical critique of ideology. With its roots in the political writings of Marxist historian Manfredo Tafuri and others, the position of autonomy posed a challenge to capitalist modes of production and was a critical reflection of the place of architects within them.

Instead, the term "critical" was hijacked by designers and theorists such as Peter Eisenman. It slowly transmogrified into an elitist, self-interested (and often self-referential) formalist discourse hell-bent on preserving "the discipline". This exclusionary conception of architecture constructed artificial boundaries between itself and anything deemed "other". Moreover, the project of architectural autonomy (particularly its

Deconstructivist strands) never seemed to deliver on the ambitious goal of exposing latent paradoxes within the tradition of Western metaphysics.

¹² The marketing and showmanship of Eisenman and others like him should be underscored for it convinced generations of smart people, Ivy-educated students, educators, and even clients (but interestingly, not the profession) to buy into the flimsy premise of an autonomous architecture.

At best, the project of autonomy is most interesting when it opens itself to the disfiguration of force and effect and the inevitable contingency of systems, flows, and people. It is my sense that these limitations of past autonomous form-making have generally not informed today's shapes and figures. Rather, there has been a cherry-picked selection of forms and techniques from the 1970s that have now been passed through a digital lens. The figures are familiar, but the "critical" political aspirations of resistance to capitalist instrumentality, the *status quo*, or whatever the original "project" actually was about—those aspirations have been lopped-off. What is left is a breezy veneer of autonomy or what Manfredo Tafuri might have called a "delicate ideological veil" in a fundamentally altered cultural and socio-political context.¹³ It's unclear if that's been a conscious or unconscious decision. Not that they need to, but would the autonomy redux cadre have anything to do with those ambitions or are they just attracted to replicating certain shapes and representational techniques? If the critical project was concerned with what architecture meant and the projective project was concerned with what it does, it is less clear what the new autonomy is after.

As to whether this is the same road, I think it is; however the road has changed. In 1972, *Five Architects* was published. In the rousing introductory essay, Colin Rowe stated the unapologetically unrevolutionary premise of the work contained within. It was an open withdrawal from the social tenets of modernism and an open embrace of its aesthetic traits, and an elision from architecture all outside interests.

¹⁴ Of course 1972 was also the date of the implosion of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in St. Louis and the so-called "death of modern architecture".¹⁵ But perhaps more relevant is 1972, as noted by the geographer David Harvey, was the moment in which a "sea change" in cultural, political, and economic practices signaling the shift to the postmodern condition occurred.¹⁶

Over forty years later, the project of autonomy, always subject to outside forces, now operates in a much more diffuse landscape. As Ole Fischer perceptively points out, "critical architecture" used to operate in tighter disciplinary field with distinct critical magazines such as *Oppositions*, *ANY*, or *Assemblage*.¹⁷ While the discipline may have operated in a more clearly defined situation in 1970s with fewer, but more powerful outlets, the contemporary media and blogosphere simultaneously opens more channels for the showcasing of autonomous objects while diffusing

the disciplinary agency those projects might hope to ever exercise. This leaves the often unpaid authors of those projects in a precarious position. Put another way, speculative projects on free architecture blogs don't really pay the bills. Some level of the bemoaned "instrumentality" is necessary to operate today (as it was in Vitruvius' time). Because the terrain has changed, it has left architects with much less agency and more vulnerable to exploitation and the vagaries of the market.

The fallacy of the project of autonomy is that it results in a proliferation of individually authored projects, all subject to the harsh edges of larger social-economic forces. It borrows modernist aesthetic cues and techniques—axonometric, defamiliarization, shock, montage—without understanding the fundamentally altered postmodern landscape in which it operates. It's a kind of throwback theory. It neoconservatively preserves disciplinary boundaries and limits discussion and inclusion of a wider audience and broader conception of agency which grapples with very important issues—just to name a few-- race, gender, economy, accessibility, identity, and the environment. Koolhaas' *Fundamentals*, and projects like it, carve out a dangerous fundamentalist position (and I hope we're all anti-fundamentalist!). Ultimately, there is no neutral ground in the debate between autonomy and the contingent object.

Today, axonometric projections of cubes, supplemented with turgid Deconstructivist prose, masquerade as "criticality" pitted against the *status quo* of the profession and capitalist instrumentality. Meanwhile, architecture has become increasingly disengaged from emerging discourses on technology, identity, and the environment. In the years leading up to the millennium, and perhaps due to globalization and a more robust market environment, autonomy faded and an interest in "projective" practices (purposely misnamed "post-critical" by detractors) emerged.¹⁸ Realizing how flimsy the proposition that architecture could ever operate autonomously was, projective practices were conceived as adaptive syntheses of architecture's many contingencies. Rather than balling up and hiding from the world-at-large, projective practices creatively grappled with materiality, program, politics, and economics. In short, projective architecture dealt with force and effect.

Despite this, decades later, the "project of autonomy" has been resurrected. Perhaps spurred by the crushing ennui of the so-called death of the "digital project", the new project of autonomy acts as a kind of throwback theory, nostalgically recreating the mistakes of an earlier generation. Blithely unaware of the utter failure of the earlier project of autonomy to catalyze any meaningful change, the new criticality parrots the aesthetics of an earlier generation with the help of updated tools (and minus the prose). "Autonomy", rather than a radical and transformational critique of the *status quo*, serves as an absurd alibi and ideological cloak for a "yolo" (you only live once) shape-play. Is such a position tenable?

Notes

- 1 Stan Allen, "From Object to Field+ Architecture and Urbanism". *Architectural Design*, 67:5/6 (1997): 24-31.
- 2 David Ruy, "Returning to (Strange) Objects". *tarp Architecture Manual, Spring* (2012): 38.
- 3 This article stems from a paper also titled "The Absurd Alibi" delivered during the session: "Object Specifics: New Figures But Still Old Problems" with Debate Group Moderator Kyle Reynolds and fellow participants Stewart Hicks, Max Kuo, Joss Kiely, and Stefano Passeri.
- 4 For another version of this argument, see Stan Allen's discussion of "pragmatic realism" positioned between what he calls "dumb theory" and "dumb practice" in Stan Allen, "Practice vs. Project", in *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation*, (London: Routledge, 2009), xvi-xxi.
- 5 Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, Book 1 of *De architectura* [On architecture], trans. Morris Hicky Morgan, in *Vitruvius: The Ten Books on Architecture*. (New York: Dover, 1960) (orig. 1914), 5.
- 6 Stan Allen, "Practice vs. Project", in *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation*, (London: Routledge, 2009), xxi.
- 7 "Rem Koolhaas is stating "the end" of his career, says Peter Eisenman" Dezeen. 9 June 2014.
- 8 Patrik Schumacher, *The Autopoiesis of Architecture: A New Framework for Architecture*. Vol. 1. (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2011). 19.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 188.
- 10 David Ruy, "Returning to (Strange) Objects", *tarp Architecture Manual, Spring* (2012): 4.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 12 See for example, Peter Eisenman, "Written into the Void" and "Autonomy and the Will to the Critical", in *Written into the Void: Selected Writings, 1990-2004*. (Yale University Press, 2007). 79-86, 95-99.
- 13 Manfredo Tafuri and Pellegrino D'acerno, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth Avant-Gardes and Architecture From the Piranesi to the 1970s*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987). 150.
- 14 Colin Rowe, "Introduction", in *Five Architects: Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, Meier*. (New York: Wittenborn, 1972).
- 15 Charles Jencks et al. *The Language of Post-modern Architecture*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).
- 16 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).
- 17 Ole W. Fischer, "Architecture, Capitalism and Criticality" in *The Sage Handbook of Architectural Theory* (London: Sage, 2012). 57. doi: 10.4135/9781446201756.n4 (link is external).
- 18 Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism". *Perspecta* (2002): 33; 72-77. doi: 10.2307/1567298 (link is external).

Credits

The image is by the author: Joseph Godlewski

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