

■ Reflections on the Autonomy of Architecture:

A Critique of Contemporary Production

Kenneth Frampton

Save for the axiom that nothing can be regarded as autonomous in an absolute sense, it is difficult to know how to initiate a discourse on the topic of architectural autonomy. Among the many aspects of the cultural enterprise, it may be claimed that architecture is, in fact, the least autonomous, compelling us to admit to the contingent nature of architecture as a practice.

It is one of the paradoxes of everyday life that although reality presses in on us from every side, we tend to overlook its effects, particularly when they do not happen to suit our ideological prejudices. Few architects care to remind themselves that only 20 percent of the total built output in developed societies is subject to the advice of the profession, so that the greater part of the man-made environment escapes our creative intervention. This disturbing fact means that we have to acknowledge the limited domain in which we are asked to operate, and in so doing we should recognize that there is a world of difference between architecture as a critical act and building as a banal, almost metabolic activity.

As is well known, the emergence of architecture as a self-conscious individual practice is inseparable from the rise of the burgher class in the last half of the fifteenth century. Our notion of architectural design as a specifically modern, innovative, nontraditional procedure cannot be traced back beyond this moment in history, when the first signs of divided labor and the dissolution of preliterate guild culture are discernible in the methods by which Brunelleschi erected the dome over Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence. We are indebted to Giulio Carlo Argan for his observation that this is precisely the moment when the so-called *artes liberales* gain their ascendancy over the *artes mechanicae* and when the rise of the individual architect/artist, as a protoprofessional, brings about a corresponding fall in the stature of the *maestri* or the master-craftsmen. This condition is reflected in the fact that although the generic cathedral and the everyday shed were markedly different

undertakings within guild culture, there seems to have been a symbiotic continuity in the medieval worldview that served to unify the entire production of an agrarian-based civilization. This continuity is evident in the fact that the barn and the temple emerged from the same genre of craft production.

It is hardly an accident that the two schisms that concern us here should occur at the same time, that is to say that labor should become divided at precisely the moment in which it becomes possible to distinguish between architecture and building and when it becomes necessary to discriminate between the architect, on the one hand, and the master mason on the other. It is important to note that this schism is accompanied by the process of secularization. This seems to have been one of the preconditions, so to speak, for the emergence of empirical science and for the rise of the new technocratic-cum-mercantile class. The nineteenth-century Gothic revivalist A.W.N. Pugin was surely justified in his polemical view that the Renaissance represented exactly the point at which exclusively economic and productive values began to usurp the place of the spirit; the moment, that is, when *homo economicus* replaces *homo religioso*. Self-conscious and schizophrenic, the Renaissance barely believed in its own ideology. It is already historicist in its dependency on the spiritual authenticity of the antique world.

The hypothetical autonomy of any given practice is relatively delimited by the sociocultural context in which this practice unfolds. That this societal limitation is apparently greater in architecture than in any other art suggests that we should distinguish precisely between the province of architecture and the province of art. It is necessary to note that, unlike all other forms of so-called fine art, architecture mixes with that which the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl identified as the "life-world," and it is this irreducible condition that sets obvious limits on the autonomy of the field. That is to say, architecture is both a cultural discourse and a frame for life. One might say, to stretch the Marxist terminology, that it is both superstructure and infrastructure. This last means that architecture is appropriated by the society in a way that is categorically different from that of art. In its appreciation of art, society seeks to preserve the intrinsic, inalienable essence of the artwork in its mint condition. Moreover, after the medieval period, society covets the indi-

vidual signature. (It is an interesting coincidence that the terms for business [*firm*] and signature [*firma*] come from the same root.) In architecture, on the other hand, society tends to transform the subjective originality of the work through the process of appropriation. Architecture in any event does not have the same iconic or fetishistic status as art, nor despite the emergence of the star architect, is it possible to give comparable artistic status to the "signature building."

The idea of appropriation returns us to the unfashionable doctrine of functionalism, although it is removed from the idea of a perfect ergonomic fit or any notion that there is a directly causal relationship between form and behavior or that a building will accommodate only one absolutely fixed pattern of use. The Dutch architect Herman Hertzberger does not intend such a fit. His idea of what is appropriate and open to appropriation is generic and institutional rather than reductively functional.

Aside from the disturbing schism that obtains in all postguild culture between the projection and the realization of built form, architectural practice has been slowly and surreptitiously undermined in the course of this century by the increasing privatization of society. Architecture has been hard-pressed to sustain its proper discourse in a society in which the public realm hardly exists and in which the continuity of the life-world as a repository of values becomes increasingly unstable. It is obviously difficult to sustain the legitimacy of architecture in a society that is constantly being overwhelmed by the innovations of technoscience, by demographic change, and by the ever-escalating cycles of production and consumption that constant modernization serve to sustain.

Lacking a collective *raison d'être*, architecture has turned first this way and then that in an effort to legitimate itself and to bring its practice into line with the dominant discourse, be it applied science as the reality principle or applied art as a psychosocial compensation. The first of these impulses no doubt partially accounts for the rise of ergonomic-cum-logarithmic design methods in the early 1960s and for the rather drastic attempts to convert architecture itself into a form of technoscientific practice. I am referring, of course, to the way in which leading British and American schools of architec-

ture—the Bartlett School at London University, in the first instance, and the faculty of architecture at the University of California at Berkeley, in the second—changed their respective names in the sixties from schools of architecture to schools of environmental design, thereby implicitly abandoning the old bourgeois, elitist, hierarchical connotations of architecture and pretending instead to the wider scope of addressing the supposedly scientific design of the environment as a whole. It says much about the pendulum of ideological fashion and the intrinsic resistance of architecture as a craft that the Bartlett School has since reassumed its former denomination as a school of architecture.

Anxiety and envy have accompanied such pendulum swings as architects have attempted to justify their *modus operandi* by appearing to be scientists or, alternatively, by representing architecture as though it were fine art, writ large. One may speak, perhaps, of “science envy” in the first instance and of “art envy” in the second. We may regard the late Buckminster Fuller as a characteristic case of science envy, and any number of contemporary architects, from Frank Gehry to Peter Eisenman, seem only too happy to have their work classified as art. Indeed both of these legitimating ploys may be detected in Eisenman’s career, in which there is a noticeable shift from the science envy of the early theory, with its dependency on structural linguistics, to the art envy of the later work, where the justifying critique has recourse to literature and philosophy. It should also be noted that there is a semiotic thread that unifies Eisenman’s career, although this hardly changes the nature of his attempt to justify his idiosyncratic practice through extra-architectural references, be they scientific categories such as fractal geometry or the supposedly subversive aims of late avant-gardism. Either way, the possibility of architecture being an essentially tectonic or institutional discourse is largely denied.

One may claim that, unlike either science or art, architectural practice favors stasis rather than process and that it tends, however weakly, to resist the fungibility of the industrialized world. In this regard, latter-day appeals to science and art may be seen as subtle efforts to accommodate architecture to the dominant categories of a totally privatized and process-oriented world.

This state of affairs has produced strange convergences. For a latter-day radical like Daniel Libeskind, the institutions of the contemporary life-world are to be eschewed on the grounds that they are contaminated by a totally destitute political and ethical reality. A similar sentiment may be detected in the stance of Leon Krier, even if Krier’s recent flirtations with practice seem to deny the total negativity of his earlier claim that “I do not build because I am an architect: I am an architect therefore I do not build.” Today, while Libeskind projects neo-avant-gardist works as though they are nothing more than colossal pieces of sculpture, Krier invites us to return to a petrified neo-Biedermeier manner, as though only such a low-key, classical order still embodies the essence of a strictly architectural culture.

It is symptomatic of the times that both architects owe their ascendance in some way to the revival of drawn representation, for although drawing has always played a fundamental role in architectural practice, there is convergence today between the revival of drawing and the assertion of architecture as though it were a branch of fine art. The socioeconomic crisis attending architecture in the seventies was overcome in part by the proposition that quality architecture could still be pursued as drawn representations that would be readily appreciated and consumed by the art market. The salon mannerism that attended all this is very revealing. One is reminded, by the way of our example, of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies exhibition entitled *The Idea as Model*, for which Eisenman produced a three-dimensional, isomorphic, axonometric model of one of his houses in which the axonometric, like the skull in Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*, could be perceived only from a particular viewpoint. These subtly interrelated gestures, stimulated by the pervasive rise of the media, evade, in my view, the issue of architectural autonomy in a more fundamental sense: that is to say, the question as to what belongs intrinsically to architecture and not to the other arts.

Clearly architecture cannot be reduced to architectural representation at any level, nor can it be passed off as large-scale sculpture. In attempting to advance a hypothetical model of architectural practice that lies beyond the idiosyncrasies of any specific style, one may say that the autonomy of

architecture is determined by three interrelated vectors: typology (the institution), topography (the context), and tectonics (the mode of construction). It should be noted that neither the typological nor the tectonic are neutral choices in this regard and that what can be achieved with one format and expression can hardly be realized with another.

On balance, the formal *parti* is of greater import than the tectonic, for obviously the selection of the type as the basic spatial order has a decisive impact on the result, however much the constructional syntax may be elaborated in the course of development. The primacy of the type perhaps makes itself most evident in the basic difference between building and architecture: for where building tends to be organic, asymmetrical, and agglutinative, architecture tends to be orthogonal, symmetrical, and complete. These distinctions would not be so crucial were it not for the fact that building and architecture tend to favor the accommodation of different kinds of institutional form.

The organic architecture pursued in various ways by such architects as Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, R. M. Schindler, Erich Mendelsohn, Eileen Gray, and Alvar Aalto affords us sufficient evidence as to the potential of what Neutra termed the *biorealist* culture of building. By a similar token, a modern architecture largely inspired by the classical can be found in the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Giuseppe Terragni, and Le Corbusier. It is obvious that our traditional institutions of power have been so frequently embodied in classical form that only with difficulty can classicism be brought to represent and embody more informal and hypothetically more democratic kinds of civic agencies. In this regard Aalto's town hall in Säynätsalo, Finland, may be seen as housing a seat of government in a particularly informal way, so that it presents and re-presents the institution in an intimate and accessible manner.

Architecture is fundamentally linked to institutional form in ways that are little understood today because contemporary society has become so privatized. From the micro to the macro scale, we have become poorly skilled as a society at discriminating between private, public, and semipublic space, and this lack of a common perception in hierarchical terms has had a brutaliz-

ing effect on contemporary architecture. The aestheticization of late modernism as a compensatory strategy becomes patently evident at this point, since irrespective of whether the stylistic affinities are neotraditionalist or neo-avant-gardist, the outcome tends to be the same, namely that architecture is increasingly reduced to a matter of superficial appearance: that is to say, it is valued solely as a convenient situation-setting rather than as a cultural value in itself. In other words, late modern building seems often to be totally divested of any articulated sociosymbolic substance, even if all the necessary functions are provided for. The fact that the civic institution has become a fragile entity in the late twentieth century is made all too clear at the level of architecture, particularly when the museum emerges as the last public building of our time. As surrogate temple or simulated *res publica*, the museum has become the compensatory realm of our totally secular, suburbanized spirit; the last depoliticized vestige, so to speak, of that which Hannah Arendt once called "the space of public appearance."

It is a sign of our times that aesthetic display has come to be used as a form of packaging to such an extent that architecture is often called upon to provide nothing more than a set of seductive images with which to "sell" both the building and its product. And while the aesthetic may well be regarded as the abstract, autonomous, self-referential quantum of late modern form, the vernacular returns us to the anthropological origins of building and to that moment in the mid-nineteenth century when the German architect Gottfried Semper formulated a new theoretical basis for architecture on the grounds of its anthropological origins. Through his transcultural worldview, Semper sought to construct a theoretical framework that would be capable of transcending the idealistic impasse of eclecticism.

Semper's quadripartite theory as contained in his essay *The Four Elements of Architecture* (1852) still constitutes a valid model with which to adumbrate the relative autonomy of architecture today. To the extent that Semper's four elements constitute a categoric break with the classically humanist Vitruvian triad of "firmness, commodity, and delight," his categories may be used as means for delineating the scope of contemporary practice. I am alluding, of course, to his reworking of the paradigm of the primitive hut,

in the terms of an anthropological exhibit that he saw at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Semper was prescient in realizing that the generic hut comprised the following components: (1) an earthwork, (2) a hearth, (3) a framework and roof, and (4) a screen wall. He was particularly susceptible to the last component because of the etymological connotations of the word *wall* in German, wherein a light, basketlike wall, known by the term *die Wand* is to be distinguished from a heavy, masonry wall, indicated by the term *das Mauer*. Semper's four elements give rise to a whole discourse that may be said to express itself in terms of heavy versus light. Thus the framework, roof, and enclosing screen are light structural elements tending toward the immaterial, whereas the earthwork and hearth together encapsulate the rudimentary institutional nexus of the work.

In the Greek *megaron*, consisting of a single cellular space with a door at one end, the earthwork may be seen as raising itself up in the form of heavy, load-bearing masonry, wherein the *light* correspondingly withdraws, as it were, to form the beams spanning the walls, supporting a flat or low-pitched roof. The hearth is contained within the *cella* of the *megaron*. Meanwhile the outriding walls establish the place form of the dwelling; where this *temenos* contains a temple, the boundary serves to separate the *cella* from the profane world beyond the walls.

The interaction of nature with culture in architecture manifests itself first and foremost through the effects of gravity and light. The structure both resists and reveals the impact of gravity on its form, wherein light discloses, as it were, the intrinsic nature of the structure. Even more important, from an institutional point of view, light may assume a hierarchical significance, in which darkness is associated with the privacy of the *megaron* and light comes to be associated with the space of public appearance—the *agora*. Both *temenos* and *agora* depend primarily upon the topographical context, that is, on the "marking of the ground" that for Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti is the first world-creating act, coextensive, so to speak, with Semper's primordial knot as the first tectonic joint. The deepest roots of architectural autonomy lie here, one might say: not in the Vitruvian triad of classical lore but in the far deeper and more archaic triad of earthwork (to-

pography), construction (tectonic), and hearth (type) as the embodiment of institutional form. These three aspects permit the structured articulation of the work as it passes from public to private and from sacred to profane, or of nature as it is mediated by light, gravity, and climate within the tectonic of the realized form.

Since around 1750, the species has been overwhelmed by the all too rapid transformation of basic material and ethical conditions and by the ever-escalating impact of technoscientific technique. These two interrelated processes have shaped the modern myth of progress. Since the turn of the century, the juggernaut of technology has been mediated if not mitigated in a number of ways. From the sculpture of Brancusi to the theater of Appia, from the philosophy of Heidegger to the architecture of Barragan, the archaic came to be reasserted as a foil to the idea of progress. This critical qualification does not depend however upon a categoric rejection of technology or on the acceptance of any particular expression. However, unlike futurism, the self-consciously archaic refuses to see advanced technology as transcendental in itself. Perhaps this complex double qualification has never been more succinctly expressed than by Aldo van Eyck when he wrote that that which antiquarians and technocrats have in common is a sentimental attitude toward time, the antiquarian being sentimental about the past, and the technocrat sentimental about the future. Van Eyck's insistence on the priority of the present does not entail some fictitious return to the past or presuppose a categoric repudiation of modern technique. It amounts instead to a critical view in which both modern and archaic technologies may be accepted and mixed together without being fetishized.

Such an attitude does not necessarily entail a reactionary cultural stance, for it seeks an appropriate elaboration of present conditions in a way that is capable of sustaining the life-world in all its richness, without wishing to preempt the significance of this world through the maximization of either technology or aesthetics. Such an attitude challenges all our received ideas of creativity to such an extent that we will be compelled to acknowledge that much that passes for originality in our time comes into being not so much out of poetic exuberance as out of competitiveness.

Behind our preoccupation with the autonomy of architecture lies an anxiety that derives in large measure from the fact that nothing could be less autonomous than architecture, particularly today when because of the domination of the media we find it increasingly difficult to arrive at what we want. Under such skeptical circumstances, architects often feel constrained to perform acrobatic feats in order to assure attention. In so doing, they tend to follow a succession of stylistic tropes that leave no image unconsumed, so that the entire field becomes flooded with an endless proliferation of images. This is a situation in which buildings tend to be increasingly designed for their photogenic effect rather than their experiential potential. Plastic stimuli abound in a frenzy of iteration that echoes the information explosion. We drift toward that entropic state that Lewis Mumford once described as a new form of barbarism. In the meantime, the ideology of modernity and progress disintegrates before our eyes and the imminent ecological disaster of late industrial production is manifest everywhere. There is no logical imperative, however, that these conditions demand an artistically fragmented, over-aestheticized expression in the field of architecture. On the contrary, one may argue that such a level of disjunction needs, even demands, an architecture of tranquility, an architecture that lies beyond the agitations of the present moment, an architecture that returns us, through the experience of the subject, to that brief illusive moment touched on by Baudelaire, to that instant evoked by the words *luxe, calme, et volupté*.