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The End of Design Theory: A Project

Gevork Hartoonian

Abstract

By the advent of the Bauhaus, the notion of design did engage in a two-track operation. Without dissociating itself from themes central to the formation of the architectural discipline, the concept of design, on the one hand, had to recode and at times delete thematic that had attained visibility in the context of labour and skills that were not sustainable under the rising regime of mechanical reproducibility. On the other hand, design became interactive in a web of communication and consumption systems that were informed by the exigencies of a culture that in less than fifty years would be coined the culture-industry. The nemesis of design in contemporary situation marked by the globalization of capital and information, I will argue, demands a radical departure from design recipes, past and present, that do not engage critically with the present production and consumption conditions of architecture. Discussing the collective implicitly involved in tectonics, this paper highlights the paradox in the contemporary theorization of design. This involves a different praxis, one that would surpass the prevailing rapport between academia (history/theory) and profession (practice).

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1 - To mark the 50th anniversary of Robert Venturi's book, the Museum of Modern Art and the University of Pennsylvania co-organized a three-day symposium entitled "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture at 50", November 10-12, 2016, New York city.

2 - Since the publication of excerpts of the book in "Perspecta", 01/1965, Volume 9-10, to Charles Jencks' most recent remarks on Robert Venturi's book, published in "Architectural Record", May 2016, vol. 204, Issue 5, pp. 58-59, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture has been visited and re-visited since its publication in 1996. For major reviews of the book, check, <http://venturiscottbrown.org/bibliography/BiblioA1960.pdf>, visited October 20, 2016.

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At no point in contemporary history have the complexities involved in the production of architecture seemed as transparent as they do today. Dialectically, I should add that never before has architectural ideology operated as sophisticatedly as it does today in the *silence* overshadowing the profound need for a historico-theoretical criticism of architecture's contemporaneity. Even as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* (1966) last year¹, the message of the book's title, also implied in the author's design strategy discussed in terms of both/and, is smothered in the face of architecture's entry into the age of digital reproducibility and globalization of capital. Fifty years ago, in his introductory remarks to Venturi's text, Vincent Scully wrote: «The essential point is that Venturi's philosophy and design are humanistic, in which character his book resembles Geoffrey Scott's basic work, *The Architecture of Humanism*, of 1914». Scully failed to notice how Venturi turned his analytical coupling of "contradiction" and "ambiguity" into "compositive methods" (Tafuri, 1980: 213). However, in spite of the attention Venturi's book draws today, most contemporary critics seem to have different interpretations of the book's significance². The events organized at MoMA, New York City, and Maxxi Museum, Rome, were not a tribute to the one of most important forebear of American contemporary architecture either. Having no doubt about the contribution of the invited speakers, these public unfolding were, speaking historically, a response to what I would call the missed encounter with the project of modernity. The Sixties seem attractive today because the decade stands halfway between two moments of crisis, the international and the global, as capitalism retooled itself, moving from mechanical to digital reproducibility. The Sixties also marks a reversal of the *political* involved in the project of modernity, paving the way for architecture to enter the communicative dimension of American consumer culture. As such, my call for «the end of design theory» should not be taken literally; it rather highlights a moment in the historicity of modernity when design attains *visibility*, when it permeates all aspects of the culture of late capitalism. Indeed, there exists no area in the present visual culture that is not designed. Recalling Adolf Loos' resistance against the total work of art, *Gesam-*

kunstwerk, Hal Foster (2002) writes, today: «There is no such resistance in contemporary design: it delights in postindustrial technologies, and it is happy to sacrifice the semi-autonomy of architecture and art to the manipulation of design». The very permeability of design, from genes to jeans, calls for critical reflections, research, and publications as a project that will be effective if it covers issues relating to the two by now separated realms of education and praxis. This critical project should also consider and address architects, building industries, historians and critics, and many other groups who in one way or another contribute to the education and production of architecture.

From Filippo Brunelleschi's design for the dome of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore; to many modernists' simplistic assumption that architecture expresses its *Zeitgeist*; to Peter Eisenman's sophisticated and wilful theorization of architecture (and the reader might want to add other architects with their relevant contributions to my shortlist), today we are witnessing an increasing domination of architecture by a production and consumption system that has culminated in global capitalism. This historical phenomenon has been openly and sometimes diligently, if not critically, unpacked, discussed in scholarly publications and in the daily newspapers of cosmopolitan cities around the world (Hartoonian, 2012 and Foster, 2011). If during the early decades of the last century technology and machine products were considered to be comrades to the historical avant-garde's project of closing the schism between the abstract and autonomous architecture of modernism and the everyday life of its citizens, now, by contrast, architecture is contemplated and experienced as the ultimate commodity-image, whilst also sheltering the wide spectrum of the products of the present media-driven consumer culture. Gone in this process of instrumentalization are those aspects of modernism – the project of social-housing, for instance – where the processes and the idea of providing affordable and decent living space for the masses (middle and lower classes) did indeed correspond to the ontological aspects of architecture – that is, constructing the conditions of life (Hartoonian, 1993).

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3 - I am drawing on my reading of Gottfried Semper's theory of tectonics. See Hartoonian, 1993. My take on Semper does not offer a design formula, but rather a historico-theoretical criticism of contemporary architecture. See Hartoonian, 2012.

images; and virtually-controlled public spheres. One of the difficulties historians and critics are facing today is how to map the collective in architecture. If in the Sixties, and in the light of Annales School's notion of *longue durée*, and through the work of Aldo Rossi, typological and morphological studies were reap-proached as a project, today, in the absence of any political project comparable to the Italian *operaismo* (Aureli 2008; Mansoor, 2016), it seems that the discussion of the collective should move from autonomy to semi-autonomy. It is not disciplinary stupid anymore! The task is to demonstrate how the thematics of the architectural discipline, which were for so long considered to be the source of design, are in fact informed by aspects of production processes that might have nothing to do with architecture as such³.

Throughout history, many trades and industries have been involved in the production of architecture. Indeed, the chaos experienced on the construction site is the result of coming and going, the replacement of one group of skilled and non-skilled labourers with another. Even though the industrialization of materials, techniques and skills has bit by bit distanced the art of building from its craft-based tradition, what is still operative in the production of architecture is the collective. Consider this: in addition to its appropriation by the masses, what makes film – the most *modern* artistry – a proper analogue for architecture is the centrality of montage and tectonics to these two industries. Call it the *common*: montage in film and tectonics in architecture operate like double agents. What this means is that what is *internal* to architecture and film is paradoxically what weaves these two artworks into the *totality* produced by capitalism. Central to tectonics is the transgression of construction, charging the constructed form with excess, the latter a licence for architecture to enter into the domain of the prevailing culture. In this, and in the process of the preparation of the site, the transformation of material to materiality, and the embellishment of the constructed form with proper detailing, the tectonic plunges architecture further into the instrumental logic of capitalism and the prevailing culture of commodity fetishism. Such is the relationship between architecture and capitalism today: a gridlock indeed, if we put aside the appeal to theory

at work since the Seventies as a remedy for the crisis of architecture.

Trying to state the dialectical rapport between the real and its related subjectivity differently, Karl Marx suggested that humanity asks questions that can be solved. Interestingly enough, Le Corbusier wrote that the solution to a problem is implied in the question itself, if stated correctly. In the last chapter of *Vers une architecture* (1923), the Swiss-French architect also posed the famous question: «Architecture or revolution?». In retrospect, Le Corbusier's decision to side with the art of building was a constructive choice; from his architecture of *purism* to the brutality attributed to his later work, Le Corbusier tried to recode the *interiority* of architecture as capitalism moved from solving one set of problems, caused by its own internal contradictions, to another. How to resist global capitalism at this point in history, when everything, including the logic and processes of instrumentalization, is coated (designed?) with the aesthetic of spectacle? To re-imagine architecture's project at a time when the art of building is weakened by various institutions, including universities, is a daunting task, the scope of which can be shored up neither by reiterating the historical avant-garde strategies, nor by the postmodernists' juxtaposition of those strategies with the allure of the Sixties mass-culture. Architects, critics, and historians should try to save the historicity of the art of building, tectonics in particular.

Along this battle line, criticism should also be directed at academic institutions that, under the name of reform and a technocratic idea of transdisciplinarity, at work since the Sixties, delete disciplines from their roster that are not profitable enough. The liquidation of any boundary resisting the total dissemination of commodification was indeed part of Jean-Francois Lyotard's observation in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Highlighting "language games" as his research methodology, Lyotard writes: «The classical dividing lines between the various fields of science are thus called into question – disciplines disappear, overlapping occur at the boarder between sciences, and from these new territories are born». He continues: «The old "faculties" splinter into institutes and foundations of all kinds, and the universities lose

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their function of speculative legitimation» (Lyotard, 1979: 39). Since then, history/theory courses are squeezed to accommodate the curriculum of art and architecture programs to the demands of *technification* (Theodor Adorno) as we enter the dawn of the digital reproducibility of the cultural. Today, *design* is expected to perform what it did during the Bauhaus period, to reterritorialize the existing labour and skills, and produce architecture in the image of commodity form. This is not to say that history repeats itself; gone in late capitalism are the revolutionary demands of the politics of art (*Kunstpolitik*) that, interestingly enough, lost its agency through the rise of totalitarian states in Germany and Russia. To rework the political agency of architecture is a daunting “design” task ahead!

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