OPPOSITIONS READER

The Oppositions of Autonomy and History

K. Michael Hays

"Naturally our respective concerns as individuals for formal, socio-cultural and political discourse will make themselves felt in our joint editing of *Oppositions*."[1] Thus did the three founding editors stake out three primary thematic domains that, through their own writings and those of other contributors, would be presented and debated throughout the history of *Oppositions*—that extraordinary apparatus for the production of architecture theory. Therein Peter Eisenman's research into immanent formal operations and notations, Kenneth Frampton's critique of the modern and contemporary culture industries, and Mario Gandelsonas's ideological/semiotic analysis of contemporary practices—to which would later be added (beginning with volume 6) Anthony Vidler's institutional and typological studies and (beginning with volume 12) Kurt Forster's materialist historiography—swirled around the vortex of architecture's "meaning." But because of the editors' personal associations and the unfolding of *Oppositions*'s international network, the pages of the journal would also become saturated with, conflicted with, and haunted by the presences of Colin Rowe and Manfredo Tafuri—the rock and the hard place, the light and the dark, between which *Oppositions*'s discourse, at least implicitly, was often conducted.

I will not here historicize this most important little magazine (though that is surely the most important work to be done and, perhaps, to be prompted by the issue of this reader[2]), but rather consider just one—I believe the dominant one—of the themes that gathers up much of the work of the editors and what they published. For the essential contradiction between architecture's autonomy—its self-organization into a body of formal elements and operations that separate it from any particular 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 of the *Oppositions* decade, indeed, seem almost symptomatic of a deeper, social pathology one would want to query more closely. 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.

In "Design versus Non-Design," Diana Agrest gives a precise description of the conditions of autonomy that most architecture theorists of the period would have endorsed:

Design, considered as both a practice and a product, is in effect a closed system—not only in relation to culture as a whole, but also in relation to other cultural systems such as literature, film, painting, philosophy, physics, geometry, etc. Properly defined, it is reductive, condensing and crystallizing general cultural notions within its own distinct parameters. Within the limits of this system, however, design constitutes a set of practices—architecture, urban design, and industrial design—unified with respect to certain normative theories. That is, it possesses specific characteristics that distinguish it from all other cultural practices and that establish a boundary between what is design and what is not. (p. 333 of this collection)

As Agrest goes on to argue, the very concept of autonomy requires us to step outside our own design culture and grasp its relationship to other cultural codes as well as its difference from them by means of some vaster historical and cultural mode of analysis. But as one pulls back to view the social life out of which autonomization emerges—in particular, after the assimilation and banalization of even the most radical of modern formal conventions into postwar commercial building, and the penetration of architecture's "closed system" by degraded information and images—then what she calls the "specificity" of the constitutive differences of architecture becomes harder to detect. For what is increasingly the case after the 1950s, as media culture develops into an all-encompassing system, is the very lack of distinction among media practices, including the design of form and space.

What is more, though the problematic of autonomy is properly part of the ideology of modernism, by the 1960s the collateral modernist doctrine of functionalism—the inter-

section of brute facts of utility with objective design procedures and standardized means of production—had given rise to the renewed, largely British and North American positivist inquiries of the behavioral sciences, operations research, systematic design methodologies, and objective technologies, all of which sought to quantify architecture's characteristics and trade its specificity for a generalized scientism. Among the equipment available for mobilization against this positivism stood Colin Rowe's emergent *Gestalt* formalism (enunciated as early as his 1947 "Mathematics of the Ideal Villa" and available to *Oppositions* readers since his "Neoclassicism and Modern Architecture" in the first issue). Rowe was perhaps the dominant influence on the early Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies (founded in 1967) up until its contact with, and importation and transformation of, European phenomenological and structuralist criticisms through Gandelsonas and Vidler, as well as Agrest and, just later, Aldo Rossi and Manfredo Tafuri. With these last, the European discourses of Marxism and structuralism began to mingle with Anglo-American formalism, and the context for the *pas de deux* of autonomization and historicization was set.

Three *Oppositions* editorials broached the theme more or less directly. Gandelsonas's "Neo-Functionalism" (volume 5; pp. 7–8 of this collection) categorized dialectically, for the first time, the position epitomized by the work of Robert Venturi—"neo-realism"—and that represented by Aldo Rossi, Peter Eisenman, and John Hejduk—"neo-rationalism"—and posited, as a possible third term, "neo-functionalism," a redefinition of modernist functionalism's underdeveloped concern with the problem of meaning, which Gandelsonas understood in the structuralist sense of differentiation and signification within a closed system. Vidler's apologia for Rossi and the Tendenza, "The Third Typology" (volume 7; pp. 13–16), identified the "ontology of the city"—a corollary of the autonomy thesis that emphasized the iterability and portability of generative types—as a possible basis for the restoration of a critical role to architecture. While Eisenman's "Post-Functionalism" (volume 6; pp. 9–12) gathered up his preoccupations with

structural linguistics, conceptual art, and avant-garde autotelic procedures, and outlined a position that would recognize architecture's epistemological status as a kind of entitlement granted by modernist thought.

Eisenman's editorial is paradigmatic of the difficult opposition of autonomy and history viewed within the limitations of modernism. Eisenman saw modernist forms not as simple derivatives of functional needs, but as delineations of the immanent, self-referential properties of architecture itself, as searches for objective knowledge that lies outside both the architectural agent's intentions and the building's uses, and inside the very materials and formal operations of architecture. Such research discovered the new in the given "language" through an articulation and redistribution of its elements; it fused the practice of architecture with the critique of architecture and replaced the functional object with a theoretical one. Moreover, Eisenman historicized such concerns as part of a new episteme, a posthumanist paradigm heralded by Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian, James Joyce and Guillaume Apollinaire, Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern, Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling, evidenced in the sheer accumulated weight of relativity and uncertainty principles in modern science and philosophy, and theorized in the antihumanism of Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss. And so Eisenman's effort to push architecture into this new era is driven by a felt historical imperative: to represent the inner logic of the object in the object itself is necessary not because of some subjective decision to exclude other considerations but because of a historical evolution crucial, if not unique, to the discipline of architecture, which delegitimizes older meanings, demands that the cultural content of an older functionalism migrate into an autonomous architecture, and concludes that the true revolutionary artist of our time is not Karel Teige or Hannes Meyer (see George Baird's introduction to the Teige/Le Corbusier dispute, pp. 585–588) but the seemingly apolitical logothete of an "atemporal, decompositional mode" (p. 12).

One need look no further than the same *Oppositions* volume 6 for an apparent counter-argument. In his "Robert

Venturi and the Yale Mathematics Building" (written in 1970; pp. 145–153), Colin Rowe noted that Venturi's thesis of radical accommodation and high-low cultural commerce—that is, Venturi's approach via "collage" (Rowe's word would later be loaded with more but similar freight)—derived from his lack of faith in either the scientific and ethico-technological positivisms *or* the myth of the historical imperative. In a passage that would be reiterated several times in his writings of the 1970s, Rowe put it to the point:

This feeling for the empirical multiplicity of any given situation rather for any cosmic vision of a millennium also carries over into what seems to be anxiety to emancipate architecture from the grip of historicism—meaning not from the styles but from the very Germanic [read "Hegelian Marxist"] supposition that history, irrespective of persons, is an irresistible force, that obedience to it is a moral imperative, that to deny the zeitgeist is to invite catastrophe, and that the architect's most elevated role is to act as no more than the agent of necessity, as midwife for the delivery of historically significant form. (p. 146)

Though more symptom than solution, Venturi's conflicted position was, for Rowe, an indication of the truth that architecture not only must refuse the formal strictures of the Modern Movement but also must escape historical determination itself—as if such a thing were possible; indeed, as if the very effort made any sense.

But Rowe's position was more complicated and, it seems to me, more dialectical (though he would not use that word) than this isolated paragraph indicates. Just two years after the Venturi review, in his introduction to *Five Architects* (published in 1972 and, like *Oppositions*, an outcome of the late-1960s CASE [Conference of Architects for the Study of the Environment] meetings; indeed, *Five Architects* may be thought of as something like a "prequel" to *Oppositions* itself), Rowe recounted how the avant-garde's Marxian ambitions to interfuse "form" and "word"—variously articulated as expression and content, system and concept, practice and theory, building and politics—ulti-

mately failed because of a particular history: modern society's refusal, so to speak, to accept the socio-aesthetic tenets of the modernism it had spawned.[3] This entailed a shift, Rowe reasoned, in the terms in which the experience of modernity was thought: a shift from modernity, fully developed, as the essential desired achievement of architecture to *modernity as architecture's limiting condition.* Feeling the force of this shift, Rowe exposed what seemed to be the only possible choice for contemporary practice: adhere to the now loosened forms, the "*physique*-flesh" of the avant-garde (which possesses "an eloquence and a flexibility which continues now to be as overwhelming as it was then") and relegate the "*morale*-word" to the dustbin of utopianism: "The great merit of [the work shown in *Five Architects*] lies in the fact that its authors are not enormously self-deluded as to the immediate possibility of any violent or sudden architectural or social mutation."[4] Once again, the true potential of architecture lies not in the prospect of its popular or technological relevance, but in the possibility of its autonomy. But even though Rowe claims to have quit with all species of determinism, it is nonetheless history that has drawn the parameters of architecture's possible variations. Autonomization appears, with paradoxical force, not as a choice but as a historical imposition.

Though I may be stretching Rowe's position too far toward a properly dialectical one (since one could adduce other examples to show that Rowe's deep disillusionment with the utopian mission of architecture and his admonition for architects to rest content with the inevitably relative and parochial character of their sources constrain him to a profound conservatism), the conclusion that both he and Eisenman reach returns us to the question of architecture's autonomization as a *symptom* of its very historicity. What was it about the *Oppositions* moment that compelled autonomization?

It is helpful to look again at Diana Agrest's formulation of autonomy, since she put the issue explicitly in terms of historically determined codes that are nevertheless irreducible, unique to the discipline of architecture, in various

xii states of transformation since the Renaissance, and relatable to other codes: "The relationship between design and culture may, then, be stated as the mode by which design is articulated (as one cultural system) in relation to other cultural systems (at the level of codes)" (p. 335) On this formulation, architecture's encoding, which reaches back to recollect traces of the sacred, cosmological, and magical dimensions of human existence, is the aspect of architecture that specifies it as a cultural practice. The threat of the positivist functionalist dogma and its progeny of behaviorism, operations research, design methodologies, and what Kenneth Frampton called the "totalitarianism of technique" (which, as I have said, is the most important target in *Oppositions* sights) can then be seen as nothing less than the unhinging of architecture from the very codes that constitute it as a functional part of culture—a rationalizing, quantifying, leveling operation that would, on the one hand, reduce architecture to a bloodless psuedo-science and, on the other, serve it up raw, as it were, as a mere condiment for the full optimizing appetite of the consumer capital that *Oppositions* (and especially Frampton) so tirelessly censured. Functionalism was seen to be part of the more general canceling of distinct experiences and eradication of disciplinary specificity that in Marxian discourse is called "reification." And in such a situation, the various researches into architecture's autonomy can now be understood in their historical trajectory as nothing quite so much as attempts to *recode*, to reterritorialize, to reinvent the boundaries and specificities that delimit the discipline.

There are a couple of phenomena that seem to confirm this hypothesis. First is the almost obsessive way architects like Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi pursued a progressive enlargement and refinement of indexical and notational systems—from "cardboard architecture" and "Advertisements for Architecture" to the Romeo and Juliet project and *The Manhattan Transcripts*, all expansions of the architectural construction and reading apparatus—that could operate as metacodes or overcodes to translate architectural experiences and concepts into other cultural domains like conceptual art, performance art, linguistics, literature, and philosophy, and make accessible, through architecture, ever larger areas of social reality.[5] Second is the renewal of a realist discourse in architecture theory around 1976, a discourse that sought an architecture whose very "authenticity" paradoxically depended on its reiterability, whose success at evoking and recollecting solid, concrete memories depended on its repetition of an already iterable code, lest it degenerate into a language so private that it is bereft of any pubic resonance. (This is exemplified by Giorgio Grassi's reference to Georg Lukács's realism of visually evoked fitness: "The 'realism' of a pillar consists…in the relation which from the moment of the pillar's appearance is established with that form in time." [p. 396]) Influenced primarily by the conjunction of the haunting typological reductions of Aldo Rossi and the Tendenza, and the high-low ironies of Robert Venturi (the same conjunction treated in Gandelsonas's editorial), the new realism was represented in *Oppositions* most strongly by the essays of Rafael Moneo, Jorge Silvetti, and Giorgio Grassi, but a similar thesis can be found in many other essays as well; even Kurt Forster's editorial in volume 25 (pp. 18–35) retains a vaguely realist aura, as it dwells on a collective architectural memory that, by 1982, seemed to have been driven underground by the ever more rampant antimodernist polemics. And the realist discourse was not confined to *Oppositions*. In special issues of *Archithese* (volume 19, 1976) and *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* (volume 190, 1977) the editors, Martin Steinmann and Bernard Huet respectively, lined up interlocutors on the subject, many of whom (Denise Scott Brown, Alan Colquhoun, Francesco Dal Co, Giorgio Grassi, Aldo Rossi, and Karel Teige) were also *Oppositions* authors.

This new realism was concerned above all with an architecture that had attained a differentiated social function, a realm within society that had developed to a point where it was governed by its own internal history and techniques, which were themselves profoundly historical and social. Martin Steinmann put it this way: "An architecture referring to itself—reflecting its own nature—is able to discover more and more meaning in the things, in the

literal sense of the word 'discover': it is as if veils which covered them so far were drawn away. Architecture which is autoreflexive in this way communicates its historicity."[6] To pursue this communicative, epistemological vocation—similar to what Jorge Silvetti, in "The Beauty of Shadows," calls "criticism from within" (p. 372), the objective of which "should be the production of a kind of 'qualified' knowledge, even if short-lived, which will emerge as an 'apparition' against a background of transparent myths" (pp. 381–382)—is what many felt to be the predominant aim of architectural practice during the *Oppositions* years. And the pursuit was motivated by the perceived need to reattach architectural knowledge to the collective social body from which it had been torn by a brute and uncultured functionalist instrumentalism.

But we must now confront another position in the dialectic of autonomy and historical determinacy, that of Manfredo Tafuri's "L'Architecture dans la Boudoir" (pp. 292–316). This position is far more radical than any other published in *Oppositions*, insofar as it makes architecture *when it is most itself*—most pure, most rational, most attendant to its own techniques—*precisely then* the most efficient ideological agent of capitalist planification and unwitting victim of capitalism's historical closure. Tafuri sees architecture not as just the victim of demolition work done on cultural codes by functionalism and instrumentalizing methodologies, or by commodification and reification, but as inseparable from and, indeed, complicitous with the quantification by the commodity system that began in the nineteenth century and had arrived fully geared up in the postwar consumer culture of America.

Formalism ... is, in this light, much less divorced from the structures of the metropolitan universe than may appear at first sight ... It is perhaps the very organizational structure of intellectual work in America, so strongly subdivided according to the stratifications of the public toward which it turns, and so "protected" from the real centers of decision making, that produces an attitude that we could define as the exaltation of its own apartness."[7]

Tafuri had originally pronounced his verdict on contemporary architecture in his 1969 essay, "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology."[8] Here he formulated the entire trajectory of modernism from the Enlightenment to the present (he assiduously refused any periodization of a *post*modernism) as a unitary development in which architecture's perennial search for its social vocation through its own intrinsic logic was recognized as a transfiguration of the rationality of capitalism into the rationality of autonomous form, a mortgaging of architecture's social equity for a well-defined cultural space given over to formal play. The contemporary struggle of architecture to return to itself through autonomous formal operations alerts us not to architecture's success, but to its coming to grief against a historical moment, one that shuts down certain social functions that architecture had previously performed.

What is of interest here is the precise identification of those tasks which capitalist development has taken away from architecture. That is to say, what it has taken away in general from ideological prefiguration. With this, one is led almost automatically to the discovery of what may well be the "drama" of architecture today: that is, to see architecture obliged to return to pure architecture, to form without utopia; in the best cases, to sublime uselessness.[9]

Tafuri's account is one more confirmation of the thesis that the autonomization of architecture in the 1970s was an attempt to recode a practice perceived to have been undone. But Tafuri supplied something like a unified field theory in which the massive decoding operations were not just external to advanced architectural practice, launched by a misguided scientism, but in fact integral to the project of the architectural avant-garde itself. In "Toward a Critique" he identified the codes of the avant-garde not as impediments to, but as veritable traces of, the capitalist metropolitan experience, and the pure architectural object as the specter of commodification:

To remove the experience of shock [of the new metropolitan experience] from all automatism, to use that

xiv *experience as the foundation for* visual codes and codes of action borrowed from already established characteristics of the capitalist metropolis—*rapidity of change and organization, simultaneity of communications, accelerated rhythms of use, eclecticism—to reduce the structure of artistic experience to the status of pure object (an obvious metaphor for the object-commodity)...: such are the tasks taken on, as a whole, by the avant-gardes of the twentieth century.*[10]

Tafuri's analysis 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 forms; the decoding, muting process was necessary *from within architecture*, as self-immolation, if capitalism was to accept architecture's presence. When architecture resists, when it attempts to reassert its own disruptive voice, capitalism simply withdraws it from service, relegates it to the boudoir, so that demonstrations by architects of their works' autonomy and distance from degraded life become redundant and trivialized in advance:

Today, he who is willing to make architecture speak is forced to rely on materials empty of any and all meaning: he is forced to reduce to degree zero all architectonic ideology, all dreams of social function and any utopian residues. In his hands, the elements of the modern architectural tradition come suddenly to be reduced to enigmatic fragments, to mute signals of a language whose code has been lost, *stuffed away causally in the desert of history. In their own way, those architects who from the late fifties until today have tried to reconstruct a common discourse for their discipline, have felt the need to make a new morality of content. Their purism or their rigorism is that of someone driven to a desperate action that cannot be justified except from within itself.* (p. 292, emphasis added)

Perhaps the bleakness of Tafuri's account is a symptom of the same forces his etiology undertook to expose (surely even a cursory analysis of the 1970s—the oil crisis, inflation out of all proportion, Watergate, and the rest—would

justify a certain pessimism). What is more certain is that Tafuri could not, in 1974, see how the same transcoding operations that enabled his diagnoses, and indeed characterized much of the work of *Oppositions*—the constant negotiations with the Frankfurt School, structuralism, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis, and the constant comparison of the conceptual possibilities of architecture with that of these other discourses—would have been retooled by the close of the *Oppositions* decade to produce altogether new codes for architecture. These codes would then be metonymically extended to new, emergent life habits and daily routines, new means of knowing, belonging, and practicing, but all still fixed through chains of spatial and formal signification. While the theorization of the autonomous workings of architecture was never really abandoned by the generation that took up *Oppositions*'s discourse, new textual strategies, based on those forged by *Oppositions*, began to fold architecture into constructions of themes that were never part of *Oppositions* repertoire—subjectivity and gender, power and property, geopolitics, and others. Though by the middle of the 1980s architectural theory had begun to partition itself differently from the *Oppositions* model, the theoretical project still had the similar effect of enlarging architecture's social and cultural domains and, indeed, expanding its genuinely practical power. Surely our belief remains the same as the first Editorial Statement: "truly creative work depends upon such an extension of consciousness."

Notes

1. Peter Eisenman, Kenneth Frampton, and Mario Gandelsonas, "Editorial Statement," *Oppositions* 1 (September 1973): no page.

2. For a preliminary history, see Joan Ockman, "Resurrecting the Avant-Garde: The History and Program of *Oppositions*," in Beatriz Colomina, ed., *Architectureproduction. Revisions* 2 (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), 180–199.

3. "Modern architecture was admired by society but not for what she conceived to be her inherent virtues. Her spouse [society] was attracted by her many external charms but was utterly unwilling to award recognition of what she conceived to be the ethical principle of her being: and, in spite of the elevated model which she offered, he remained stubbornly confirmed in his old ways." Colin Rowe, "The Present Urban Predicament: Some Observations," *The Second Thomas Cubitt Lecture at the Royal Institution, London* (London: Thomas Cubitt Trust, 1979), 3.

4. Colin Rowe, "Introduction," *Five Architects* (New York: Wittenborn, 1972), erratum submitted to the second edition.

5. Tschumi actually raised the autonomy paradox to a second power in "Architecture and Transgression": "If a piece of architecture renounces its conceptual autonomy by recognizing its latent dependency on reality—social or economic—it accepts its integration into the restrictive mechanisms of society. On the other hand, it sanctuarizes itself in an art for art's sake position; it does not escape classification among existing ideological compartments. So architecture seems to survive in its 'erotic' capacity only wherever it *negates* itself, where it transcends its paradoxical nature by negating the form that society expects of it." (p. 371)

6. Martin Steinmann, "Reality as History: Notes for a Discussion of Realism in Architecture," *A+U* 69 (September 1976): 33.

7. Manfredo Tafuri, "The Ashes of Jefferson," in Manfredo Tafuri, Pellegrino D'Acierno, Robert Connolly, ed., *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 292.

8. Manfredo Tafuri, "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology," *Contropiano* 1 (1969); reprinted in K. Michael Hays, ed., *Architecture Theory since 1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 6–33.

9. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), ix; emphasis added.

10. Tafuri, "Toward a Critique," 14.