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Autonomy vs Place
Erik Ghenoiu

Anonymity

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture),
Bernard Rudofsky (Architecture Without Architects)

"Rather than denying or even supplementing the high culture, therefore, histories of the vernacular complete it." -Dell Upton

Interest in "anonymous architecture" continues to this day. The internet has produced a situation where the boundary between "high architecture" and "anonymous architecture" is blurring. Anybody can add whatever images they want to their pinterest board, intermingling Arts and Crafts classics with contemporary knock-offs. Suburban subdivisions are designed by architects, but these architects prefer not to let their names be known.

What exactly do we mean when we talk about "anonymous architecture"? Different definitions frame the question in different ways, and naturally produce very different conclusions.

Probably the most famous example of anonymous architecture research is Bernard Rudofsky's "Architecture Without Architects." Rudofsky defines his "anonymous architecture" generally as architecture produced by cultures that do not have the formalized position of "architect" - productions of modern western civilizations cannot be integrated into his perspective. The goal of Rudofsky's exploration of "architecture without architects" is to discover beautiful new forms, "primitive" architectural patterns that is somehow more "alive" and exciting than austere modernism. It is reminiscent of modern architecture's use of African masks to discover a kind of art that is unsullied by uptight, western civilization.

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, a decade before Rudofsky, defined "anonymous architecture" in a broader way – for her, anonymous architecture is produced just as much in the West as in the East, as long as the architect who produces it is not remembered. For her, anonymous architecture is architecture that lies outside the orthodox tradition of modern architecture. While both Moholy-Nagy and Rudofsky interrogate "anonymous architecture" to discover new architectural truths - their methods and results, however, are quite different. Moholy-Nagy uses anonymous architecture to deepen the practice of modern architecture.

More specifically, Moholy-Nagy is making the argument for the importance of place inside the Modernist narrative of the autonomous, placeless architectural machine. Essentially, her argument is about context: the book is divided into three sections, each related to a different contextual feature: "expression of site and climate, ... form and function, ... materials and skills." answering the "where, why and how of anonymous architecture."

Moholy-Nagy's essay is an attack on the over-homogenization that was a consequence modern architecture. She anticipates counter-arguments, saying that this kind of research will not be useful "to those who define architecture either as pure esthetics [Le Corbusier]...or those who consider it predominantly a branch of modern technology." Although she refers to Corbusier, she expends most of her ammunition on the engineering branch of architecture - exemplified by Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House, and tract housing in general ("boxes, held together by no more than Federal Loan Certificates."

It is relatively easy to criticize both of these arguments. Rudofsky offers an essentializing fairy

tale in which the magical “other” is only useful to us by reminding us of the “soul” that we have forgotten as we have turned into civilized man. The forms that he finds are beautiful, but they are literally only pretty pictures, and any further examination would be useless. Moholy-Nagy's work is deeper, but she cannot escape her devotion to modernism – she cannot help view anonymous architecture through the unquestioned lens of modernism – searching for ideal buildings by native geniuses, and then reintegrating these to bolster weaknesses in the modernist program.

Is it possible to imagine a better program for anonymous architecture? The word “anonymous” is dubious – these architects are often not anonymous but erased for our own ends. But vernacular architecture, which has integrated many of these lessons, is not the same thing. Perhaps Dell Upton's distinction between construction and construing is useful to consider here. Architectural history has long been written from the point of view of the architect, for the purpose of justifying architectural practice. Anonymous architecture might instead begin from the point of construal – from the observer, the non-architects who inhabit and continually modify the world around them. Maybe anonymous architecture is practiced every time somebody redecorates a room, or visits a cathedral or sits inside a cubicle. Or maybe that is something else entirely.

(P.S. One more thing. Architecture has been far too obsessed with the idea of authorship, and the idea of defending its territory. Although usually attributed to a single individual, this is rarely how design functions – buildings are products of large teams, whose interactions are not quantifiable. For more than thirty years, the technology community has run a very successful experiment with radical abdication of authorship – the open source movement. Although projects have a maintainer, this can change over time, and it cannot be said that a single individual is responsible for anything. Apart from transitioning away from the glorification of the author, this movement has the effect of allowing for the much better transmission of knowledge, and discovery of errors. Architecture's complete failure to explore this model of production is directly related to its fraught relationship with recognition and anonymity.)

Taste + Interpretation

Charles Moore (Plug It in, Rameses, and See if it Lights up.)

Lots of people believe architects are out of touch - that the opinions of architects are out of synch with the people they are building for, and that the field is just a giant echo chamber that produces buildings that aren't relevant to “normal” people.

The question of taste is ever present in architecture, but stays in the shadows. Why do we like what we like? How do we know what is correct? I didn't always know I wanted to be an architect; when visiting places, I haven't always taken an architectural viewpoint. This means that I've visited some famous places without being aware of why they were important, much less what the "correct interpretation" was. Now, presumably, I know better, and I long to return to those places with my current knowledge, to appreciate what I did not understand, to evaluate things more correctly, to understand more fully.

I was struck by this feeling while reading Charles Moore's "Plug It In, Rameses, and See if it Lights Up." This winter my wife and I visited California, and made the trip up the Pacific Coast Highway from Los Angeles to San Francisco, stopping at many of the sites Moore mentions.

We were underwhelmed by Santa Barbara - the Mission was a small colonial outpost, it lacked the monumentality that one desires for such historical structures. The small building had been overwhelmed by tourist economy - whatever aura the building might have once had dissipated. The city itself was also disappointing - Moore speaks of the pseudo-historical Spanish history that the city has

constructed for itself - we did not notice this, and saw only a generic, Spanish-inspired California city. Perhaps the uniqueness of the stylistic choices have been overwhelmed by the spread of this style throughout the state. Unfortunately, we did not know to visit the City Hall.

In contrast, we spent a few days last winter in Santa Fe - before visiting we had learned the story of the city - town planners had decreed a Spanish mission style in the 1920's as a tourist attraction, and the friends we were staying with had spent a good amount of time fighting the board of planning to build their house with larger windows. The city seemed absurd - giant mansions with tiny windows pretending to be adobe huts - it was a transparent, inauthentic lie that seemed well past its time.

We continued north, and reached our destination for the evening - the Madonna Inn. Nobody had told us to visit Santa Barbara, or the Hearst Castle, but two friends had independently told us to stay in the Inn. We spent the night in the "What's Left" room - made up of leftovers from the decoration of other rooms. We knew that this place was also a tourist trap, but while the other places pretended to be something else - in this place we were in on the joke. Do you want to stay in Old Mexico, the Love Nest, or the Captain's Bridge? You, the tourist, can stay wherever you want.

There is a joy in reading that "Yes! The Madonna Inn really is architecture!" - and a kind of sadness in reading about the hilarious, glorious Santa Barbara City Hall, whose grandeur flew over my head.

Our decisions of what is "good" and "bad" in architecture are profoundly important - we define the shape of the world through our designs, and our designs are shaped by the value we give to other ideas - "autonomy", "locus", etc. Where do these feelings come from? What makes some good and some bad? What is the power of saying that this is good and this is bad?

Taste is a powerful, unspoken aspect of architecture. Almost all architectural decisions revolve around taste – many would argue that other kinds of decisions – structural, economic, sustainable – are not in fact “architecture,” but engineering or some other field.

I have spent my time in architecture school baffled by this problem. For much of 4th semester, my drawings were rejected because they were not beautiful enough. How can we tell if something, a single line, is elegant, beautiful? What makes a crooked line ugly and a smoother line elegant? Hina Jamelle has an entire practice centered around “Elegance”, but what this really seems to mean is that she makes personal decisions about taste and rigidly enforces them.

Taste is also at the heart of the inherent conservatism of architecture. Taste is socially constructed, and socially moderated – we know what is beautiful because others agree with us. It takes a bold person to disagree about matters of taste, especially considering that there is no intellectual framework to support these decisions. Taste becomes essentially a matter of personal status – there are “tastemakers,” people who we respect for various reasons who are allowed to make decisions.

Pinterest is full of people expressing their personal “taste” and sharing it with the world. When I visit that website, I circulate in a highly selected group of people – many of whom share my preference for “high” culture – minimalist architecture, abstract paintings. The large portion of pinterest is (at least this is my impression) quite different – they are mothers and teenage girls, and they share things that we would describe as declasse or reactionary – English manor houses, over-sentimental craft projects, cute animals, makeup advice. Can these two groups even talk to each other? Should they?

Architecture has off and on tried to dictate precise elements of taste. This is directly associated with the idea of style. Maybe there is no way to define taste, but an open admission to its role would be hugely valuable to architectural discourse, while also laying bare much that is superficial or ridiculous in modern practice.

Leon Krier / Peter Eisenman Conversation

Mark Wigley

"the alternatives that appear as opposites-order and disorder, laws and change, structure and chaos - are in reality entirely complementary." - Manfredo Tafuri

Watching the Bernie Sanders / Hillary Clinton debate last night - and reflecting on our weird contemporary political climate - I was reminded of Mark Wigley's critique of Eisenman and Krier as "simply two matching brands." We seem to be experiencing a political paradigm shift, as Trumpism has brought to power a powerful nativist strain in the American body politic, while on the other side a self-declared socialist has come very close to the presidential nomination.

And this shift reveals exactly how similar the two "sides" have been for so long, both accepting fundamental assumptions (rationality, globalization, etc.) - and critiquing the other's position within that set of assumptions. This paradigm has the effect of mutually reinforcing both sides, defining the set of acceptable discourse and strengthening both sides as the only legitimate sides of political discourse. What Wigley says of Eisenman and Krier could equally be said of the Republicans and Democrats: "The positions are so symmetrical that there is no dissonance or exchange. Each side, in fact, adjusts to become the opposite of the other."

The Overton window is a concept from social psychology that describes a set of ideas that a group of people believe are politically acceptable - ideas outside of that are not taken seriously. Although invented to describe politics, the same idea applies to architectural thought (of course, architecture is also political).

During the time of Krier and Eisenman, their sides seemed like the only sides that mattered, the only discussion worth having. Krier and Eisenman define themselves as rivals, opposite poles - but they are really just opposite sides of a single world-view that they continually confirm by their arguments. Every discussion that they have, every disagreement, legitimizes the fundamental assumptions that they both hold. While on one level they are opposites, from another angle they are very much the same. To be fair, meaningful discourse is difficult without a mutually agreed upon foundation.

I wonder if this reveals a deeper problem with the idea of a dialectic. In order to have a discussion on a subject, we first must accept a set of ground rules. "The earth is round." "Global warming is happening." "Cause and effect exists." "We can communicate and reach conclusions through the exercise of reason." being a few examples.

"Most architects talk past each other. In a sense, they are simply rivals competing for a part of the audience share." This seems to be what is happening with Krier and Eisenman. What is the point of their discussions? Is anyone persuaded to one side or another? Does it even matter? What happens when one of them wins (maybe Eisenman won the architects, and Krier won the public...) Presumably at some point we set off on a new direction, examining new ideas. Maybe we can stay in the same place forever, debating the same old points. Maybe the whole point of the debate is just to sharpen both sides, to produce stronger arguments for the production of more precisely opposed, symmetrical buildings.

Is this what happened with the classical tradition for millenia? Is this the natural state of architecture? Of discourse? How do we know when we can quit arguing? When do we move on? Do we declare a winner, or do we just declare the game invalid because the rules were wrong in the first place?

Thomas Kuhn, in his book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions," describes science undergoing radical paradigm shifts - long periods of relatively inactivity, or scholasticism - can give way very quickly to bursts of transformation as one set of paradigms is replaced by the other. The analogy to architecture is clear - the Eisenman/Krier paradigm superseded the postmodernist, which superseded the Modernist. Where are we now? Where are we headed? What assumptions that

Eisenman and Krier took to be fundamental were overthrown (by Rem?) What assumptions do we hold now, and which of these is most vulnerable? What are the foundations of our edifice, and how can they be undermined? The project of architectural theory consists not of building a grand theory, but tearing apart the theories that we do have, looking more and more deeply until we have found the final axioms that our architecture must rest on. Maybe once we find them, we can destroy them as well.

Mannerism + Contrarianism

Denise Scott Brown (Everyday America),
Denise Scott Brown (Room at the Top?)

The immense power of Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture and Learning From Las Vegas comes from not just their decision to face objects traditionally ignored in the architectural canon, but their willingness to embrace them.

I went into architecture because it seemed more willing than other fields to resist orthodoxy – to think new thoughts, to challenge traditional systems. I have been surprised to find that architecture is also hopelessly entrapped in its own orthodoxy – that new or different ideas about what is correct in architecture are ignored or rejected, as they challenge the basis on which so many people have constructed their careers and identities.

Charles Moore poses a powerful question that modern architecture did its best to ignore - what do we do with the spaces that we did not want, but that have come to exist nevertheless. "[T]he commercial strip which they abhor has arrogated to itself more vitality, more power of growth, indeed more inevitability of growth, than the whole of their tidy output put together."

Denise Scott Brown proudly proclaims a contrarian predilection - "my interest in architectural mannerism - breaking the rules, liking what's shocking."

How do we deal with things that violate, and even discredit, our perspectives? Scott Brown's question: "Can't you architects hold off your criticism of strips and sprawl just long enough to find out why people use them?" exposes the reactionary nature of much of architecture – rather than engage with the real problems of the field, we would rather hide in our theoretically authorized bubble.

In *Everyday America*, Scott Brown's contrarianism is focused on the symbolic or structural elements that architecture is afraid to confront. In *Room at the Top?* her focus shifts to the profession itself – architecture has long been the domain of upper-class white men, who tended to ignore and diminish her role, preferring to elevate her husband Venturi to the status of Starchitect. One suspects that these two sentiments are related – forced to constantly battle a profession that is biased against you, one naturally might choose to examine other biases in the field.

I wonder if this criticism can go deeper still – architecture is happy to criticize itself, but only so far. We examine the assumptions of architectural historians, but rarely challenge the fundamental ideas of how the profession works. But is there any reason to think that the pedagogy and practice is any more legitimate than the history that glorified it? Architecture emerged from a particular social situation, deeply entwined with the legitimization of power. If we believe that this role has disappeared, and that architecture now speaks for other groups, or even for itself, we must wonder why the practice seems so continuous? What would architecture be like if the field was first invented in Soviet Russia, or the Global South, or beavers and birds and bees? Does architecture truly serve the good of society, or even the good of architects? Or does it instead function to protect itself and the powerful architects who we still idolize? Is architecture able to criticize itself, or is this a project that can only take place from the outside? What strategies can we employ to transform, or even destroy architecture? Can we design a field using its own tools (is this autonomy?) What questions are so contrarian that we dare not even ask them, and what happens if we do? Maybe it's a bad idea.

Typology + Classification

Aldo Rossi (Architecture of the City),
Anthony Vidler (Third Typology)

"I would define the concept of type as something that is permanent and complex, a logical principle that is prior to form and that constitutes it." - Rossi

How do we classify buildings? There are of course many ways: residential vs. commercial; classical vs. modernist; urban vs rural.

Perhaps there are many ways, perhaps there is only one – typology – that contains all the others. For a long time I understood typology in a very limited way - typology was the use of a building - the typology of the house, or the museum, or the factory. There are too many words that fit under this category: "single/multi family", "compartmented/compact/continuous/composite", "landscape", "city block", "skyscraper", "palazzo."

Reading Vidler [?], I was excited to finally understand why everyone kept talking about typology – typology can be something much broader - the motivational origin of architecture, and all that encompasses. He describes two grand typologies that have "informed the production of architecture" since the 18th century - the first the idea of the primitive hut (and all that entails?), the second the idea of technology.

Both of these motivations generate a class of forms.
"Nevertheless, a closer scrutiny reveals that the idea of type held by the eighteenth-century rationalists was of a very different order from that of the early modernists and that the third typology now emerging is radically different from both."

What do typologies do? They are formal rules that we define for kinds of spaces. Almost anything fits in here. Typology is just a way of creating an interface between raw space / form and some set of requirements. The buildings (population?) that can be extruded through this interface are then the typology.

A much more rigorous kind of typology exists in the domain of computer science. There are fundamental types of objects – strings, integers, booleans – and objects of different types have to be transformed into a common type to interact with each other. Without a common type, there can be no common set of operations from which to operate with.

Although typology is clearly a powerful concept, I suspect there are problems with its architectural definition – it is too broad, allowing too much inside, which makes it difficult even to talk about, much less to use in a critical analysis. A typology based on the industrial machine has an overwhelming number of connotations – so many very different objects can fit in here, that their relationships to each other break down. And an architectural object can fit into so many (infinite) typologies, that we cannot ever systematize them.

What this produces (or what produced this) is the kind of beautiful poetry of Rossi and others – ideas about what architecture represents that are so rich that they cannot be understood rationally, only felt. Typology currently exists in architecture as a kind of poetics – something that can be felt and intuited, but not something that can be employed. Typology seems, like much of the Italian work, to be defined in a way that makes it beautifully useless.

Nature and the Universe

David Ruy (Returning to Strange Objects),
Daniel Hoffman (The Evolutionary Argument Against Reality),

Richard Dawkins (Selfish Gene)

"The world presented to us by our perceptions is nothing like reality...[E]volution...maximizes evolutionary fitness by driving truth to extinction." -Daniel Hoffman

David Ruy, in advocating his philosophy of Object Oriented Ontology, issues a call for architecture to abandon its preoccupation with fields – systems of relationships that are the hallmark of the do-gooder landscape paradigm of theory – and instead more closely observe the qualities of the individual objects that are the production of architects, endlessly complex and irreducible. He claims that some of the objects of study of the do-gooders, "'nature' and 'world,' are themselves not real objects." And this valid criticism progresses to examining the problematics of these ideas, our assumptions that nature exists in a steady state that we are disrupting (rather than in constant flux), and that nature itself is somehow superior to humanity, and that our obligation is to be stewards of this fictional nature, rather than crafters of it.

But Ruy's presumptions about the clear division between our constructs (nature, eg) and "real" objects ("this frog, that tree, this river, that building") are curiously underexamined. Richard Dawkins argued in his book "The Selfish Gene" that the fundamental elements of life (itself a pseudo-object) are not in fact whole organisms, but individual genes – the history of evolution is not about the competition between various organisms to perpetuate themselves, but about individual genes to proliferate. And these genes have surprisingly more agency than we once believed, sometimes jumping between species, splicing themselves in and creating new, novel systems of relations.

Daniel Hoffman, in a parallel argument, argues that our perception of the world, which we like to believe is in some way a truthful representation of what is "out there", cannot truly be trusted. In fact, evolution is not biased towards verisimilitude, but rather towards fitness – our perception of the objects of the world – snakes, frogs, trees, rivers – is instead an expression of our own biases towards survival, and are simply heuristics that increase our probabilistic ability to survive and reproduce.

A similar claim can be asserted regarding the architectural object – architects describe objects – buildings, usually – that we then attempt to create in the real world. But these objects, upon examination – break down in a variety of ways. A building is a useful fiction, consisting of countless atoms that do not know they compose a single object, composed of countless spaces that are experienced differently by every user, at every moment, existing in a relational landscape that does not care who designed what, and whose relations will constantly transform themselves over time.

Perhaps the ultimate object is the self – we perceive ourselves as unitary wholes, acting with a kind of autonomy in the world. But there is no reason to believe this feeling is anything more than a delusion – our brains consist of multiple compenents, interacting with each other to produce a combined feeling of consciousness, and these components are themselves constructs, as the brain is actually composed of individual neurons, acting as an irreducible system, and these neurons are themselves constructions, expressions of various proteins and lipids and electrical impulses, and even that can be reduced.

We exist in a world of unlimited, unknowable complexity, and must decide how to act in it. Do we see the world as a system of objects, or a system of relationships, or a fundamentally unknowable, inaccessible, beautiful mess? Ultimately we must act, in some way – we are born and we travel through time and space and we do things and we die – maybe we have control of our actions or maybe it is all an illusion generated initially for the sake of self-preservation, and now derailed on a strange tangent called human civilization. We make arguments about what is real and what is false, what is rational and what is irrational, what is good and what is bad, but who knows if those what those really mean.

We can at least take solace in the fact that the universe will end, either in a big crunch or a slow heat death, and that all evidence and memory of everything we have thought and done will disappear.

So whether we are wrong or we are right (and we are almost certainly both and neither), it doesn't matter too much in the end.

Gunkspace, funkspace, bunkspace, punkspace

Rem Koolhaas (Junkspace)

What the fuck is junkspace? I read that whole essay and I couldn't make out a coherent argument. (To be honest, I didn't read the whole article. I skipped pages 6 and 7. I don't think it matters, maybe that's actually the point.) It's just a series aphorisms?

Is "Junkspace" junkspace? Is Rem just generating more junkspace? Or maybe copying its form? Why are there no paragraphs? How do I read this text? Am I supposed to read junkspace the same way?

I asked my classmates what junkspace was. Some had never heard of it. Most didn't have an answer. Mark told me that it was stuff like airport space where it all seems like it's the same thing. Somehow they are all united by air conditioning. Spaces that are all the same. If there there was junkspace before Rem described the idea, what was it? What was junkspace like before air-conditioning? What was the first junkspace, the primitive junk? What is junkspace's relation to junk space, aka the dump?

Is junkspace like junk food? If junkspace is the fallout of modernism, is junk food the fallout of capitalism? We can abstain from eating junk food. Should we? What do we do about it? What about junkspace? It seems unavoidable. We must consume junkspace. Space is not like food.

Before people realized that junkspace was junkspace they called it megastructure. That's what Rem says at least. Maybe junkspace is all the leftover space we have in the world. Space that isn't architected? Or does that even matter? Space that architects can't handle. Architectural excess.

Should we look at junkspace or avert our eyes?

I talked to Craig and he told me that junkspace was non-place space. That it came from neoliberal capitalism's transformation of the whole world into the same space. Starbucks is junkspace. Hotels and airport lobbies are junkspace. Spaces that nobody inhabits, but everybody just passes through. The highway is junkspace. Traffic is junkspace. Maybe junkspace is the product of a profligate creation of space.

I don't think "Junkspace" is junkspace. But maybe it's trying to evoke junkspace? Everything has some sort of meaning, but maybe not. Ideas are powerful, compelling, but don't quite fit together, but maybe they do. Junkspace is everywhere and nowhere at once. Everything is junkspace, until you look at it, and then it becomes real space. Maybe, maybe not, I'm not sure.

During our field trip I found out that Salvatore Ferragamo is junkspace. So is McDonald's. The place doesn't matter. The architecture is irrelevant, concealed, plastered over. Rem made some junkspace - they are called Prada stores. Maybe he made more. To be continued (perhaps, sometime in the distant future).

Autonomy + Recursion

Victor Hugo (Hunchback of Notre Dame),
Eisenman (Neo-Functionalism),
Manfredo Tafuri (Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology),

Until this semester I had not spent much time thinking about architecture's autonomy – I did not know it was such an important subject in contemporary theory. If I had thought about it, I would have compared it to worrying about free will – of course we are not autonomous (just like we are not free),

but we may as well pretend we are. Our actions are so heavily conditioned by our environment that even our conversations about the subject can be of little value. But let's just get on with it and do architecture anyway, because there isn't really another option.

Perhaps I was missing the point; maybe the concern with architectural autonomy is much more constrained than this, maybe global determinism and local autonomy can coexist. Autonomy is less about the problem of existence than it is about how architecture justifies itself.

One strategy for justifying architecture is to look outward. Hugo's famous essay, "This will kill that," in issuing an obituary for architecture, also provides a profound posthumous justification - architecture used to be for teaching the lessons of citizenship to an illiterate public. With the advent of literacy - to say nothing of the separation of church and state - this justification for architecture dissolves.

This argument, expressed by Peter Eisenman among others, seems suspiciously simplistic. Architecture only served this one function, and this function was completely eliminated by global literacy? Perhaps this is just shorthand for the expression that architecture once served a social instructive role – its job was to condition and control the inhabitants of a place in the service of authority. But this seems dubious also – Tafuri has argued very persuasively that architecture is still captured by capitalism, and so still very much operates in the service of authority, no matter how much it rages against it. This is an inherent problem of building physical buildings – they must be approved by capital, government – the very forms of authority that architecture might try to fight against.

Eisenman proposes a different approach, abstract and formalist: architecture is the exploration of the meaning of space (perhaps in regards to its relationship to human inhabitation.) Although excluding from its analysis much of human existence, the closure of this kind of analysis is satisfying - we can fully explore the meaning of space through straightforward geometrical, algorithmical expression, perhaps forever. Tafuri's critique of this approach, however, is equally apt - this kind of approach is hermetic, and cannot accommodate the other aspects of architecture and human experience.

Tafuri proposes the idea of turning architecture upon itself as a mode of criticism - that architecture can criticize itself, that it can find meaning in its own history and theory. Recursion in computer science, is the ability of a process to reference itself. It is regarded by programmers as one of the most powerful and mysterious techniques. On the other hand, it cannot do anything that a non-recursive program can; it adds beauty and clarity, but not power.

The weakness of Tafuri's argument seems to be that architecture cannot truly examine itself using its own tools. The system is already so deeply entwined with ideas about history, nature, politics, etc. that its tools cannot be sterilized – we would need to start over, inventing a new kind of architecture to really apply this approach – that project seems equally impossible. Sometimes Tafuri just makes you want to give up.

Remembering, Forgetting, Meaning

Manfredo Tafuri (L'architecture dans le Boudoir),
Aldo Rossi (Architecture of the City)

"Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" - Noam Chomsky

I have to admit that I am still not entirely sure I understand the idea of the locus. At the same time, I am not sure that Rossi entirely understands it either, or that there is a single unified, consistent idea there which can be understood. I am supposed to begin this essay with a thesis, and then attempt to prove that thesis. Of course we have to take a stand, but if anything, this set of essays is permeated with the idea that any stance is fundamentally flawed, that any idea is subject to criticism and will be superseded by other ideas, maybe more true, maybe just more appropriate in a different context. If

Rossi and Tafuri and Eisenman are all wrong, then I will also be wrong. Maybe I can find the flaws in their arguments; maybe I can construct some nice little ideas, but probably not, they probably wouldn't be original anyway.

What is the point of writing these anyways? To encourage deep engagement with the text? To improve my ability to write and think critically? From whose perspective is that question even being asked, the student, the teacher, the school, the profession, the society? Most of these questions cannot be answered, or can be answered in a variety of different ways, which is maybe the same thing.

What then is my thesis? To begin with a thesis, we must find a thesis to confront – argument proceeds from dialectic, the confrontation of two opposing views. I intend to confront and deconstruct Rossi's ideas about the meaning of the city and the locus which, although beautiful and deep, are also essentializing .

Rossi asserts that the "One can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people", that the city is "city is the locus of the collective memory."[1] Furthermore, the city and the architectural objects have an essense, and "that if the architectural construction we are examining had been built recently, it would not have the same value."[2]

Although we are inclined to believe that our memories are accurate representations of the past, this is not the case; memory is a process of construction. We do not store a complete memory in our brains, but fragments. When we remember, we reassemble the fragments that we have, and fill in the blanks. Every time we remember we create a new memory that displaces the old one. A memory is always an interpretation, a synthesis of fragments of original moment and what has been experienced before and after. Memories exist in an interface with the natural world. Memories lie dormant, waiting to be triggered, an thus remade; in the same way, memory resides in every architectural object, waiting to be read, and re-interpreted.

Rossi asserts that "the concept that one person has of an urban artifact will always differ from that of someone who "lives" that same artifact." But this does not go far enough. Any two people who have lived the same artifact will have different concepts of that – based on their own experiences and expectations, their own complex of memories.

What is the nature of the memory that is embedded in architectural space? Monuments project a kind of grand collective memory - they reflect values from a certain time, as perceived through modern eyes. They are in some ways the most honest and telling of the memory shards of the city, because they (at least we assume) were constructed with a specific purpose, an idea that they were designed to project. But this memory becomes obscured over time – in fact, it is obscured immediately, because even the author cannot fully understand what is being written. And whatever their initial meaning was meant to be, this becomes quickly eroded, as we write on top of it with our own expectations and idealized imaginations of what the mindset of the monument builders was. In this way, by attempting to project a single truth, monuments become the biggest liars – they tell the lie that meaning can be recaptured, that the city or the object has a fixed definition and that it is our responsibility to understand it. The truth is that the monument is what we make of it for ourselves. Rossi makes reference to this reality in his reference to" whole pieces of the city...whose function now is no longer the original one"[3], but this kind of transformation conflicts with his ideas about the permanent essence of the city.

Tafuri asserts that it is the fate of the post-modernists to "work with leftover materials, with the garbage and throwaways of our daily and commonplace existence, is an integral aspect of the tradition of modern art.[4]" But this is not the product of the collapse of a certain kind of intellectual rationalism. Rather, this is the reality of all works of interpretatin. A theory is nothing more than a series of fragments, perhaps assembled into a rational argument, but the argument, like rationalism itself, cannot

1 Rossi, *Architecture of the City*, 130
2 Rossi, 29
3 Rossi, ibid., 29
4 Manfredo Tafuri, 292

stand up to scrutiny. What persists is not the fundamental idea, but the fragments, which are endlessly reassembled, a millenia-long series of chimera, some of which are more persuasive, more desirable than others.

The city itself is therefore indistinguishable from the ruin. A ruin is typically considered as an architectural object that has been abandoned – whose use has been abandoned. The ruin is an object that is simultaneously monumental and invisible. Sometimes, ruins retain fragments of memory – aspects of them are preserved, and these become what we believe to be the essence of the ruin – the important parts should be the ones that we remember, right? More interestingly, sometimes they are completely forgotten, and entire histories become constructed around these ruins. We do not know what they meant, but we know what they mean to us; they become repositories of false memories, memories of what should have been, expressions of our current beliefs about how civilization and reality operates.

What about the microscopic fragments? The potsherds, arrowheads, and refuse piles of architectural history? This can, in aggregate, tell us something - analysis can tell us what was eaten, what kind of kiln was used, contextualize entire bodies of information. On their own, however, they reveal little, allowing extrapolations that can be wildly incorrect. Science becomes another technique for story-telling, for extrapolating inadequate information into a coherent story, which is then legitimized through the technique which is used to analyze it..

And in fact all architectural objects are ruins. The Seagram Building holds a dramatically different meaning today than it did when it was constructed - the original meaning of the building is entirely inaccessible to modern eyes. We can perhaps catch glimpses of it, but the original meaning is lost, and our best hope is to reconstruct a story that is useful to ourselves (or myself, since my story will not have any relevance to you.)

How then do we deal with this situation, this seeming meaninglessness? If all objects fundamentally retreat from understanding, how do we move forward. Tafuri offers some kind of comfort in the idea of deconstruction at the heart of criticism: "At the origins of the critical act are always found the acts of distinguishing, separating, and disintegrating a given structure. Without the act of disintegrating the object under analysis, it is impossible to rewrite it." The act of criticism is an act of deconstruction, in which we disassemble an endlessly rich object into separate pieces, and employ those pieces we find relevant in our reconstruction. Interpretation, like memory, is a constant act of construction – our feelings and ideas about a building, whatever they are, take on their own validity, independent from whatever other meanings the object might have.

This is how I have reconciled myself to the reading of Rossi, who, although beautiful and poetic, is also cryptic and mysterious. There are fragments of his text that seem immensely valuable, but the thing itself is beyond my comprehension. What is the locus? We discussed it in class, but I've forgotten the answer – which was not in any case an answer, but an interpretation.

Just as we cannot read a building accurately, we cannot read a text. The meaning is lost as soon as it is written - in fact, the author does not even have control of the meaning of his work. In each moment, the meaning is transformed. We can perhaps push forward, or in a certain direction. We grab pieces, and re-deploy them in the service of our own beliefs, theories, etc. We attend class, and our understanding is transformed in response to the teacher's own interpretation, and we deploy these understandings into the creation of text, or design, or ideas.

In discussions in this class, I do not remember much of the text that I have read; in my life, most of the events that have made up my experience are forgotten. We do not remember for long. Arguments become fragmentary. The act of writing presents a crystallization of a series of fragments of thought, a trace of what has passed. It won't last forever, but it will last for a while, and we can experience its value for the time that we have to enjoy it.

Truth, Lies, Simulation

Dell Upton (Architecture History or Landscape History?),
Colin Rowe (5 Architects),
Peter Eisenman (End of the Classical)

"[Modernism] was an elaborately indirect mechanism for suppression of feelings of guilt"[5]

Of the many things I have learned in architecture school, one of the most important is the value of lying. Architecture students lie often, and well. It is a skill we learn quite early.

When designing an architectural object, the most important thing is that it is beautiful, persuasive, compelling. Without the ability to produce desire and excitement in the viewer, the object has no power, and will be forgotten like countless other designs throughout history.

The process of creation is messy – you have to try things and fail, over and over, and you don't always have a good reason for doing something. Sometimes it feels right, sometimes you just need to do anything. You can't spend all your time waiting around for the exact right reason.

Once you have a beautiful, powerful object, then, you have to find a way to justify it. That is just as much a part of the design process as the creation of the object, and it helps if the justification and the form can have a conversation with each other, but it's not necessary. How you got there doesn't really matter, only the story you are able to tell at the end.

Truth is arbitrary, unreliable. What matters is what we make, the things hold their own truth, perhaps. Are these lies? How do we deal with the knowledge that we are just making things up as we go along, for our own personal benefit? What happens when the day of reckoning arrives?

Colin Rowe and Dell Upton act as reckoners in their two articles, calling out old lies to clear a new path for architectural practice and history, respectively. Rowe demolishes standard modern architectural theory - although the modernists made great promises for the utopian results of their work, they failed to change the world, and many ideas even had negative impacts. How do we employ modern architecture if its promises turned out to be fiction? Dell Upton comes from a similar angle at architecture history, beginning from the practice's fundamental origin as a means of "legitimizing architects as professionals" - a practice which has from the beginning been involved more with ex-post facto justification than using research to drive practice. Upton describes history and theory as "complementary strategies of defining a distinctive realm of expertise and of devising a mechanism for limiting entrance to its practice"[6]

Rowe's reaction to this fundamental compromise is to split architecture in two - one part meaning, the other part form, to discard what is compromised and keep what is valuable - he claims the architectural forms themselves are valid and useful, and can now safely be extracted from their historical context and imbued with new (complementary?) meanings. If we confess our sins, we can be absolved to use the modern forms for new purposes.

Upton produces a different kind of answer; faced with the compromise of all of architectural history, it is necessary for Upton to propose a new, coherent basis for architectural research. Upton proposes the cultural landscape, rather than the individual artist or building, as the basic unit of inquiry.

How can we respond to this crisis of architectural history? Upton presents three options, the first two he rejects – accept broken architectural history, warts and all, as a particular system and soldier on, or attempt to reconfigure architectural history by combining its different elements in new and novel ways.

Upton instead proposes a broadening of architectural history, as part of a broader trend of the dissolution of boundaries among the humanities. He proposes architectural history reorient itself

5 Colin Rowe, 5 Architects,

6 Dell Upton, Architecture History or Landscape History, 195

towards the cultural landscape, privileging the "human experience of its own landscape, rather than the relationship of maker and object." This solution would address some of the problems that Upton describes, in particular architectural history's capture by the architects, and allow it a new kind of autonomy as it explores the relationship of the experiencer to architecture and architecture's broader role in society, rather than viewing architecture primarily through the lens of the architect.

At the same time, I am suspicious of a "solution" to the problem of self-deception – rather than learn the limitations of our ability to understand and be honest about the world and our motivations, Upton's proposal feels like another utopia, whose limitations we will only discover once it has been developed. Not all problems can be solved, however, and we may need to reconcile ourselves with the fact that whatever path we choose will be full of error and deception; perhaps it is best to choose a direction that is rich with meaning and relations, rather than the one that is most correct?

Eisenman, in his essay "The End of the Classical," offers us a potential way out of this bind, by introducing the idea of simulation. Eisenman, like Upton and Rowe before him, asserts that architecture has historically operated under a series of fictions. For Eisenman these fictions are representation, reason, and history. Whereas architecture may have at one point been able to transmit meaning through orders, representation no longer carries meaning because we no longer believe in the classical orders the way we used to. Likewise with reason, whereas architecture originally derived its authority from its relationship with the divine, and later substituted science into the place of the divine, a more thorough inspection of the apparatus that produces "knowledge": "The processes for knowing - measurement, logical proof, causality-turned out to be a network of value-laden arguments, no more than effective modes of persuasion."[7] And of course history has been dealt with quite thoroughly already.

"The three fictions just discussed can be seen not as fictions but rather as simulations. As has been said, fiction becomes simulation when it does not recognize its condition as fiction,"[8] Eisenman, writing before computers dominated architecture, sees simulations differently. He regards them as half-lies rather than almost-truths. And this perspective is valid – it is important to acknowledge the fictions that we are telling ourselves, even if we simultaneously believe them.

Our simulations today have become dramatically more powerful, now that we have machines to run them for us. We can simulate sunlight, solar heat gain, weather patterns, traffic flows. We can use simulations to collect and organize data, to determine or support our design decisions. Simulation may not be accurate, but it can come close enough to reality, in some instances, to provide us with valuable insights.

Rendering used to be done entirely by hand, but even this had an element of simulation. Two point perspective is a simulation of real-world vision, and this development provided a powerful method for advancing architectural representation. Our representational simulations today are much more powerful, and this carries dangers as well as opportunities. Computer renderings – simulations of the physical world - are extraordinarily powerful tools of persuasion, ways that we can show a building just as it will look once it has been built (often, better than it will look when it is built.) This over-precision can make us uncomfortable with the simulations. They are too good, too persuasive. They project too much reality. They are morally questionable. First, we learn to make our simulated renders accurate; then, we have to learn how to make them less accurate. They must lie to tell the truth. [Sometimes we feel that the simulations are "too real" - that they make some artistic choices more difficult while over-specificizing what is an ambiguous future reality.]

A brief discussion of mathematics is useful here. Euclid's famous axioms are the historical foundation of geometry – these are taken as given truths, upon which the entire edifice of geometry can be constructed. The parallel to a simulation here is very clear – we begin with assumptions, which we

7 Eisenman, 157

8 Eisenman, 159

believe to be true but cannot be proven – and use them to create a grand model rich in meaning and implications. But we know now that Euclid's axioms are not what he originally believed them to be; the great advances in non-Euclidean geometry in the 19th century emerged from the invalidation of one of these axioms – the parallel postulate – which asserts that parallel lines never intersect, and non-parallel lines intersect at exactly one point. This axiom holds true on a flat plane, and generates a certain kind of geometry; however, it does not hold true on a sphere, where parallel lines do in fact intersect, and holds even less true in the physical world, where space is curved in many different ways.

What does this mean for architecture?

Eisenman proceeds to describe a positive aspect of non-truths: "alternative fictions for the origin can be proposed: for example, one that is arbitrary, one that has no external value derived from meaning, truth, or timelessness."[9]

Having spent the semester dealing with the impossibility of action and truth, this idea is very exciting – what if we can find truth through fiction? What if we could simulate whole worlds? (Well, that seems impossible, and morally dubious.) At the least, what if we could simulate different architectures? What would architecture be without steel, or concrete, or the column, or the arch? What would architecture be without Vitruvius, or Le Corbusier, or Robert Venturi?

If we can imagine an infinity of alterate architectures, what do we do with them? What architectural simulations would be the most valuable? Eisenman deals very delicately with the idea of fiction in his piece "The End of the Classical," wherein he busts apart modernism, claiming that it was never even really present in the first place. "Thus to proceed from "error" or fiction is to counter consciously the tradition of "mis-reading" on which the classical unwittingly depended-not a presumedly logical transformation of something a priori, but a deliberate "error" stated as such, one which presupposes only its own intemal truth."

Ultimately, if truth is impossible, fragmentary, unknowable, perhaps we can place our value in fiction. Everything we say and believe is a kind of fiction, some of which are acknowledged, some of which are not. Some of our fictions try to hew as closely to truth as possible, some veer far away and reveal greater things through this distance. If we acknowledge that truth is impossible, we should try to develop a systematically unsystematic field of fictions. As Godel famously proved (demonstrated? asserted?) no formal axiomatic system can prove all of the theorems that it contains. There are always truths that are beyond the reach of our systems, and these systems themselves are always a kind of fiction. Perhaps it would be more productive – it would certainly be more enjoyable – to develop a menagerie of architectural fictions that let us tell powerful lies about architectural truths.

9 Eisenman, 161