

Notes on the Autonomy of Architecture I Essay Cameron McEwan I April 2013

One place to situate the theme of autonomy is in Emil Kaufmann's discussion in the 1930s on the work of Enlightenment architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Kaufmann emphasised formal aspects such as: cubic masses, bare walls, frameless apertures, and flat roofs. For Kaufmann, the isolation of parts, their dialogue as either repetitive or oppositional elements, represented a formal autonomy. Autonomy re-emerged in the 1970s when architects challenged pseudo-scientific and technologically-driven projects, such as: Kenzo Tange's 1960 project for Tokyo Bay with its raised roadways from which residential units could endlessly aggregate, Buckminster Fuller's 1962 domed geodesic smog shield over midtown Manhattan, Archigram's pop-image megastructures like the 1964 Plug-in City, Paolo Soleri's anamorphic urbanism, and in Italy, Archizoom's anarchic No-stop City, a continuous urban structure "without architecture." In projects like these, formal issues are replaced by statistical analyses, technological optimism, and the potentially infinitely extendable, "open-form." This path of development is opposed by those architects who follow the theme of autonomy in architecture. In recent years, autonomy has been discussed once again in texts by Pier Vittorio Aureli, Michael Hays, Reinhold Martin, and Anthony Vidler. [1]

The introduction of historical critique into the discipline of architecture is a characteristic the theme of autonomy. However, it is complicated by two general positions that refer to the argument about what kind of historical critique is appropriate. One kind of critique proposes an ideological critique of the history of architecture. An examination of all the contributing factors around architectural form, such as the social, cultural, economic and political, in order to understand how architecture is produced through power. The other kind of critique proposes a typological critique of the history of architecture and its formation as the city. An examination of typological-form in order to understand the processes, principles and formal operations that underline the production of form. In particular, the relationship between the form of the individual building as it relates to the wider collective realm of the city, and the history of architecture. It is important to say that both attitudes are independent of one another, but share a commitment to the repositioning of the "I" of architecture to the "us" of the city. Whether through understanding the form and role of architecture within the city as a product of social, cultural, economic and political concern. Or as much for architecture as a product of the historical, urban and typological structure of the city itself. Again, both positions prioritise the collective mind over the individual.

There is a problematic overlap in these positions because architecture supports social, cultural, economic and political aspects and is their concrete manifestation. Thus, architectural form cannot be considered as a single, isolated event because it is bounded by both the material and immaterial reality in which it exists. However, what the theme of autonomy can do, is open a discussion on what it means to view architecture as autonomous. Thus autonomy refers to notions of separation, resistance, opposition, confrontation, and critical distance, which can be instrumentalised by the architect through the production of images, and texts, as well as buildings. It is worthwhile to note a few specific examples in the recent history of architecture.

Manfredo Tafuri, in *Architecture and Utopia* bleakly surmised architecture to be an instrument of capitalist development used by regimes of power, thinking it useless to propose purely architectural alternatives. However, he said that it is the conflict of things that is important, insisting on the productivity inherent in separation. In *Critical Architecture* Michael Hays writes that architecture is an instrument of culture, and also is autonomous form. The former view emphasises culture as the content of built form, and depends on social, economic, political and technological processes. The latter concerns the formal operations of architecture, how buildings are composed, and how architectural form is viewed as part of a continuing historical project. Aureli develops an autonomy thesis in *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, in which he articulates an engagement with the city through confrontation. Aureli writes that it is the condition of architectural form to separate and be separated. In this act of separation, architecture reveals the essence of the city, and the essence of itself as political form. For Aureli, it is the process of separation inherent to architectural form that the political is manifest.

In the work of Aldo Rossi the autonomy of form produced critical distance between the legacy of modern functionalist architecture and its critique, of which Rossi was a key proponent. To outline an example, we can refer to two projects undertaken in the early 1970s. A school at Fagnano Olona, and a cemetery outside Modena. Both projects share a precisely defined bi-lateral plan-form. Extending perpendicular from this axis are wings which arrange classrooms in the school, and graves in the cemetery. Either end of this central axis is marked by a circular and a square element. At the school, the circular element is a library which enters into the courtyard, and the square element is a gym hall.

At the cemetery, the former is a conical grave and the latter, a monument to the war dead. Both plans refers to the axially arranged institutions of prisons, hospitals and asylums. In so doing, function is superseded by autonomous form, and the history of architecture is collapsed into a single building.

By way of conclusion it is illuminating to recall the political category of agonism posited by Chantal Mouffe in her book *On the Political*. We can think once again of the I/us relationship of the opening paragraphs, and more particularly the interrelated, we/they relationship. For Mouffe, the agonist principle develops from the idea of the political as a space of permanent conflict and antagonism, and hence a constancy of the we/they opposition. In antagonism there is no shared ground in the we/they opposition, so opponents are enemies. While in agonism, there is recognition of the legitimacy of the opponent, so enemy becomes adversary. Remembering that autonomy refers to notions of separation, resistance, opposition, confrontation, and critical distance, we could say that a crucial meaning of autonomy in architecture is to constantly produce a form of agonism through the production of images, texts, and buildings.

[1] See for example: Aureli, Pier V. *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (MIT Press, 2011), Aureli, Pier V. *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture Within and Against Capitalism*, Reprint 2012 (Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), Hays, K. Michael. *Architecture's Desire* (MIT Press, 2009), Martin, Reinhold. *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), Vidler, Anthony, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism* (MIT Press, 2008).