An Architecture of Change

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Hope coincides with an increasingly critical perception of the concrete conditions of reality. Society reveals itself as something unfinished, not as something inexorably given; it becomes a challenge rather than a hopeless limitation.

FRIER, Paolo: Education for Critical Consciousness

Powerful voices are emerging to call for an architecture of change, an architecture that matters to everyone, and these voices are being nurtured and sustained by the activist practices of designers and citizens working close to the ground. As the voices grow louder, the message is becoming increasingly clear: architecture can both do good by societal standards and be good by professional standards, and design does not have to be compromised in the process of serving the needs of others. These voices have the potential to become an immense wall of sound and a primary force shaping the discourses that define the roles of the architectural academy and the profession of architecture. The voices of change collectively call for the activation of a politicized and spatialized project that will work to counteract the forces that typically control production of and access to space. They claim that the political work of architecture is not limited to the work of building. They assert that the political can be beautiful and that architecture can be socially engaged in ways that sidestep the conflicts of ethics versus aesthetics and finance versus virtue.

The emergence of new voices from the margins calling for and acting on an architecture of change, the continued presence of established voices, and the myriad voices in between illustrate the fluidity that characterizes contemporary architectural and intellectual landscapes. The forces that influence the ideas, knowledge bases, and practices of our discipline are in constant flux. If our political engagement is to move beyond “tiny empowerments” and toward systemic change, we must find a way to move out of the cacophony of a million voices and toward the harmony of a choir that obtains its power from collectivity. What is needed is an architecture of change—an architecture that moves the field beyond the design of buildings and toward the design of new processes of engagement with the political forces that shape theories, practices, academies, policies, and communities.

Modernism: A Promise Unfulfilled

The call for an architecture of change is not new, but it has fallen out of favor. The early modern movement possessed a clear sense of political engagement, and it envisioned broad societal change as a crucial and fundamental part of its architectural practices. What Jürgen Habermas has termed the project of modernity emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, a transitional period of social unrest, armed revolutions, and rapid industrialization and urbanization, all occurring as logical outcomes of Enlightenment ideals. The modern movement conceived of progress and technological advancement as tools to be employed in the service of social equality. Modernist architects strove to create “universal” spaces—rational, orderly, and accessible—that would give opportunity and freedom to everyone. While the utopian ideals represented by proposals such as Charles Fourier’s Le Nouveau Monde were not to be realized, such projects are worth recalling, even as we question the universal truths and grand narratives they espoused.
By the early 1900s many of the modernists’ goals had been realized, aided in part by the professionalization of architecture and urban planning. In constructed form the flaws of a modernist architectural palette that is separated from utopian social ideals came clearly into view. Mainstream modernism as represented by the International Style was regarded as increasingly disconnected from the everyday social world. Modernist architecture was seen as powerless during the 1960s as urban renewal programs and public-housing projects remake landscapes in distinctly modernist idioms throughout the world; but by the end of the decade, the demise of the modern project was well within sight. Forces for social and political change were taking aim at modernism’s evident failures. Grand narratives were challenged by localized and unheard voices, universal truths were challenged in light of contextualized differences, and international formal styles were challenged by indigenous cultural expressions. Modernism as a movement was discarded not because of the ideals on which it was based but because of the conflicting principles by which it was realized—namely, the contradiction between the goal of social change and those of market capitalism and institutionalized power. While much would agree that modernism’s end has provided new opportunities, the loss of an ideological agenda has had a significant impact on the future of the profession to influence the production of space and the public realm at large.

The end of the modern movement also brought with it the end of the political project in architecture. As postmodernism stepped in with a series of variants to replace the modern paradigm, the political continued to disappear from mainstream architectural practice. This occurred despite the fact that many prominent critics of the modern project helped open dispositive venues for previously unheard voices. Cultural theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and François Lyotard called attention to the totalization inherent in universal narratives, the failure of eternal truth, and the impossibility of achieving the goals of overarching emancipatory projects. These theorists and many others pointed out the totalizing of the modern project’s utopian musings, emphasizing that enlightened reasoning does not protect us from the whims of totalitarianism.

The fruits of modernity seemed to have rotted on the vine. Postmodernity opened up a space within which to question established thought, and that very questioning seemed to provide yet another new promise of emancipatory progress. A new utopianism began to emerge that questioned the construction and representation of the self and the other. Freed at last from the hegemony of modernity, society would rise up to show its intrinsic diversity. An implicit expectation of the third space was that it would not support universal frameworks.

However, without the ability to address broad societal goals, architecture was left to focus inward. In this way the postmodern movement liberated critical thought from the confines of rationalism while continuing the liberation of architecture from politics. Postmodernism gave rise to severe contradictions between the emancipation of ideas that envisioned pluralistic power and the implosion of architecture within institutionalized power.

We are again in a period of rapid transition. Political, social, and economic changes have transformed the manner in which space is produced and accessed. Space has become the final frontier of capitalist expansion, and the political continues to be re-energized from the architectural. Both modernity and postmodernity have failed to deliver on their respective emancipatory promises. Each in its own way promised to free the individual from oppressive regimes, to improve our social standards, and to facilitate access to our social and physical landscapes.

The Postpolitical Turn

The postpolitical turn, which has been emerging for some time, has surveyed the current architectural and intellectual landscape and has pronounced that we have entered a postpolitical age.2 The implication is that architecture’s recent infatuation with critical theory has now run its course, leaving us with a pragmatist’s agenda for the foreseeable future. This is a pragmatism of expedience, not the pragmatism of the philosophers, which was founded upon a critical stance toward the autonomy of theory. Philosophical pragmatism reminds us that theory is not an end in itself, and it seeks to test ideas and measure their ultimate impacts for a collective social good. This uniquely American contribution to philosophical investigation has held promise, but a postpolitical orientation cuts off the one good leg of a pragmatic stance: without a critical engagement with the world around us, we are left with just another way of doing things, and little or no formal, ethical, or intellectual guidance to help us choose a path.

The postpolitical is not pragmatic; it is symptomatic. It is symptomatic of a profession that has benefited from an economy that limps ever forward. It is symptomatic of an academy that has been seduced by fashionable theoretical projects, only to reproduce them in bastardized form. Not only have American architectural efforts in the last fifty years been largely aesthetic exercises, but they also have flirted only briefly with the political—and then only in symbolic form. If modernism’s political project failed to journey across the Atlantic as a part of the Museum of Modern Art’s famed exhibition in which Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson first exposed the North American project to European modernism, then critical theory and its potential for radical reforms have now been sent back overseas to their Continental homeland as the summer of ’68 continues to fade in our collective memory.

Political blindness is not new to architecture, nor is it rare in society. To stake a political claim is to run the risk of clashing with a divergent set of cultural values and alienating potential clients, prospects that few find enjoyable. Discussions concerning the political and issues such as equitable representation in real and imagined spaces are potentially painful and are therefore frequently avoided. The political thus remains an invisible and often unspoken subject to otherwise well-grounded discourses and practices.

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disciplinary vacuum within which architectural ideologies are often investigated further fosters a social and political blindness that a postdisciplinary stance can only reinforce. If we adopt a position that ignores the advances that postmodern thought and critical theory provided us—a utopian goal of equity, fruitful diversity, and a critically engaged process of cultural production—we may find ourselves inclining in a nihilistic similar to that of early modernism, which promised societal change almost solely through architectural practices and failed to recognize that space and its production are controlled by the dictates of capitalism and politics.

It is important to reclaim the critical utopianism of the postmodern project and critical theory. Critical social and cultural theories can form the backbone of a renewed political agenda. They can challenge both the unawareness of social landscapes and the forces that produce such landscapes by looking at the way things are in terms of the way they could or should be.

We must find a way to be both unified and diverse. This is not a renewed call for all of us to get along; this is a call that requires a fundamental rethinking of the political in a changing society. To question the political in this era is to challenge societal conditions in an age of multicultural values, identity politics, and liberal agendas largely in retreat in a post-9/11 world. Contemporary American liberalism is dominated by a notion of multiculturalism that is essentially apolitical. For this reason mainstream multiculturalism is an ideology that downplays the potential clashes within a radical cultural pluralism in favor of established models of cultural integration. Mainstream liberalism and multiculturalism seek to eliminate discussions of uneven political, social, and economic empowerment in favor of a reformulated cultural melting pot, in which everyone has ostensibly had an equal opportunity. Mainstream liberalism and multiculturalism are fundamentally Enlightenment ideologies in three primary ways: they advocate an adherence to a set of core values; they reject political consciousness; and they overlook questions of political and social parity, asking us instead to turn our backs on the question of power.
and pedagogy. This project therefore entails a complete reconstruction of the current system of education and practice. Such a reconstruction would require three points of action. First, an understanding of the role of the market in realizing design should be integral to the education of an architect. We must know how to calculate and evaluate the effects of our proposals, both in terms of dollars and relative to their contributions to the spaces of our cities. Architecture should not be marketed at the expense of our communities. At the same time we also must question the tendency to blindly accept the market as a guiding principle. This uncritical acceptance is disempowering and undermines our capacity to conceive of alternatives or to define architecture differently. Instead of trying to move entirely outside of the influence of capitalism (a task nearly impossible in the twenty-first century), we need to challenge capitalism from within. We can refuse to play unquestioningly by market rules that insist on the profitability of design; we can investigate the market’s spatial impact and look for ways to circumvent its negative influences. This can be accomplished through actively engaging citizens and communities in democratic design strategies and participatory architecture. Such practices refuse to conceive of architecture as a product that is designed and then turned over to the market for realization. Instead architecture should empower architects, designers, and, more important, citizens to build their own future. This requires that designers ground ourselves in our diverse communities and be prepared to collaborate. The goal is to transform design from a reactive process to a proactive one, working through collaborative and dialectical relationships with citizens to imagine new possibilities, processes, and implementation strategies that challenge traditional methods and market norms.

Second, we must reconsider the power of utopian thinking as a way to form a unified front. Utopian thinking can help consolidate a movement behind a set of ideals, goals, and principles that redefine design as a mode of political and social action. This is not a nostalgic act but instead an attempt to redefine utopianism as a process and to view social and political organization as tools to help us articulate new emancipated spaces, not universal spaces. Modernist utopias failed in part because of their dependence on the state and capital for their realization. The system that utopian practices were intended to transform was in fact the same one required for their construction. As a result of these spatial utopias were stripped of their broader social agendas when they became real spaces or architectural objects. We have to reconceive utopianism not so much as a practice but as a process, one that has the potential to transform both the production of space and the distribution of social and political power. This concept moves architecture beyond a solely physical practice and refines academic and professional architecture as fields that envision alternative futures and have the means to help realize them.

Finally, as a liberalized process, architecture should illustrate the value of alternative spatial practices with a plurality of aesthetic and spatial modes of civic expression that facilitate a diverse set of public realms. This requires both discourse and action. Discourse is called for to address the production of place as tied to specific positions within a social matrix of power, culture, identity, and politics. Such a discourse asks that architecture become a participatory practice, one that engages diversity of thought, action, and collectivity from both within and without. It suggests that projects in the academic studio and in practice should not be removed from the influences that shape their realization, but should instead be grounded in the processes and practices that mold our built environment and our forms of social and political organization. This is a call to act, to apply liberating spatial practices that work toward a realization of unity and diversity in our communities.

Ultimately, we have to recognize that acting in the world means taking responsibility for the consequences of those actions. By acting, we have chosen one route over an infinite number of others. The alternative is to not take any action and to accept conditions as they stand—and that is unacceptable.

Who Has Access to the Idea of Architecture?
Power is increasingly an asymmetrical component of the production of space. Developers, financial sectors, and public policy have served the purposes of powerful interests, and the architecture profession has followed behind blindly. In addition, the economic landscape has constrained the possibilities of design, particularly for those who have little access to the lending, banking, and investment industries. Prestige must be achieved through making design relevant to community practices and issues, instead of through costly work for the elite. The percentage of those able to afford architectural services must be increased, and that goal entails a growth in the number of those who have access to the idea of architecture.

If the relevance of architecture can be transformed through a critical engagement with the practices that shape the production of space, then the culture of architectural education (followed by practice) can also be transformed to create an economically and culturally diverse set of actors and audiences that perceive the profession as an active participant in the transformation of society. Along with the family doctor, dentist, local shopkeeper, and mail carrier, everyone would know a local architect, and they would know how she or he contributes to the greater good. Until then, the doors of the academy must be thrown open and its ivory towers infiltrated and transformed by the real issues facing our society. The academy has been far too limited in its ability to meet the needs of diverse students, citizens, and communities, and this condition will likely worsen as the resources available for higher education are reduced and the cost of a university education rises. We need a radical transformation in education if the academy is to become an accessible and effective agent of change.

Charles Moore is rumored to have said that there was nowhere in Los Angeles to have a revolution. The same is true of the contemporary university. We need a new school for a new school of thought, and this necessitates a liberalized intellectual venue. The theory behind an architecture of change would free education by infiltrating and dismantling academies, informing policies, transforming architectural practices, and dispersing knowledge to and from communities and citizens: an architecture of the streets. This theory would suggest that architectural education will be elevated by being grounded in the needs and agendas of a diverse and engaged audience with the capacity to influence the production of space and build places to have a revolution—and in fact to build the revolution itself.

The foundation of architectural thought is constantly shifting. Theories are offered, accepted, disproved, and abandoned in rapid succession. Each movement reflects the political, economic, and cultural issues of the time, representing a different amalgamation of good deeds and good design, and profoundly influencing the practice and education of architecture. If we do not act now to begin a spatialized political education and to implement an architecture of change, the polarization emerging around the globe will continue; the twenty-first century will be defined by a paradigm of access to space through division; and the tools for transforming space will become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few.