



# Toward an Architectural Theory of Negative Matter

Education is fundamentally a mode of mental corruption. From Jean-Jacques Rousseau's romantic naturalism to the vampire-like presence of phenomenology, there is a persistent line of philosophy and cultural production that is devoted to saving the human species from the discontents of language, history and criticism.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, this has become the culture of the architectural profession (and paradoxically

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even much of architectural education): The architect has become a drug user (a believer) and not a drug pusher (an agnostic), a victim rather than a villain.

This course takes the stance that to be uncorrupted by critique is just naïve.

That to be optimistic is the worst form of pessimism.

That to be pure is to be unknowingly guided by theories of innocence.

We architects are not losing our innocence; we simply should never have had it.

Why "negative matter?" Yes, matter is the topic of this session (I pander), but there is also a reason for trying to define such a thing as "negative matter." Matter has been invoked in recent architectural theory as a substance that alienates design from the abstractions endemic to digitalization, professionalization, etc.; in other words, it offers a revolution of reality against abstraction (a straight forward avant-garde move). Thus matter *relies* on reality and acts on reality as a first principle. Get more real and you inevitably show the ideological limits of abstraction.<sup>2</sup> Negative matter is resolutely *unreal*; it postures disbelief to question both the diminishing distance and the growing identity between any form of digital or capitalist abstraction and reality. Negative matter aims to abstract from abstraction and to produce an even *greater* distance from the real.

Therefore: *it is time to produce an architectural theory of negative matter.* As a disciplinary degree zero, it is time to collect all the most damning attitudes documented in the history and theory of architecture and to assemble them into a unified position, a negative one. This course is suspicious of: technological pleasure, scientific fantasy, the senses, experience, talent,

nature, happiness, comfort, health, cleverness, reality, and authenticity. This course seeks to explore: death, sickness, wickedness, cunning, boredom, doubt, murder, and difficulty. Throughout the term, we will produce nothing except negativity. No positive words will be spoken. No works of great genius and no revelations.

### WEEK 1: NEGATIVITY

First things first: why be negative? The answer: to reveal and critique a prevailing cultural norm that assumes an adherence between our concepts and objects. Theodor Adorno's philosophy was based upon "the consistent consciousness of nonidentity," meaning that every object could (and should) be alienated from thought. To resist identifying one's concepts with objects in the world allows a consciousness of *difference* as a critical starting point: the dialectic. Not that we should all now come to love Adorno, that prude—he was certainly the kind of guy that could take all the fun out of life. But that is the purpose of the first week: to make things a little less fun. So we start by reading Adorno, in an attempt to dash both hope and innocence.

### WEEK 2: DEATH

In the second week we test a form of total negativity: death. This is also the strongest position from which the shortcomings of life can be gleaned. Everything will eventually die, but scripting death seems eminently useful for the purpose of being negative. From literary criticism to architectural criticism it is possible to insist that if an author cannot be killed, he was never alive. If an architectural project cannot be killed, as Sylvia Lavin has recently argued, it is equally unlikely that it was ever alive.

### WEEK 3: WICKEDNESS

While still alive, it is possible to enact negative behaviors that proper society deems evil, so-called moral corruption. Reading Nietzsche reminds of the possibility of such an ontological negativity. Nefariousness, nastiness, and naughtiness: be wicked, all for the sake of producing the aforementioned distance.

### WEEK 4: SICKNESS

Kill by weakening. In 1992, Greg Lynn presented the possibility of sick architecture: non-ideal, anexact, etc. This, he positioned in opposition to the humanist formalism of Colin Rowe, making that norm into another form of pathology. Rowe was redeemed into the black hole of anachronism. It was a slight of hand maybe, but also a tantalizing form of negative criticism.

### WEEK 5: CUNNING

This week is devoted to traps, philosophical absurdities, and endgames. Hegel played a cunning trick on architecture at the beginning of his *Aesthetics*. At the origin point of art, which he located at the development of so-called independent architecture (obelisks, mostly), Hegel required that architecture be excluded from the future development of art. In the context of this course, Hegel's reduction of architecture to a pure origin is compelling in that it inserts an original negativity within architecture (architecture

## READINGS

### Week 1

Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* [1966], trans. E. B. Ashton, (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

### Week 2

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Circular Ruins [1940]," *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions).

Sylvia Lavin, "The Report of My Death," *Log 25* (Summer 2012)

Assignment #1: Find an architectural project that needs to die. Stage its death.

### Week 3

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* [1887], trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Press, 1969).

Manfredo Tafuri, "The Wicked Architect: G.B. Piranesi, Heterotopia, and the Voyage," *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

### Week 4

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* [1887], trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Press, 1969).

Manfredo Tafuri, "The Wicked Architect: G.B. Piranesi, Heterotopia, and the Voyage," *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987).

### Week 5

G.W.F. Hegel, "Architecture," *Lectures on Aesthetics Volume II* [1835], trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford University Press, 1975).

Mark Jarzombek, "The Cunning of Architecture's Reason" *Footprint 1* (Autumn 2007).

#### Week 6

Frederick Jameson, "Video: Surrealism and the Unconscious," *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 67-96.

Michael Meredith, all his boring-ass movies

Assignment #3: Do something interesting and then make a boring movie about it.

#### Week 7

Claude Perrault, "Preface," *Ordinance for the Five Kinds of Columns after the Method of the Ancients* (Los Angeles: The Getty Center, 1993).

Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967).

#### Week 8

Sigmund Freud, "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy (Little Hans) [1909]," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Volume X (1955).

Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today* [1925] trans. James Dunnitt (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987).

Assignment #4: Reenactment: one passage from *The Decorative Art of Today*, today

#### Week 9

Leopold Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs* [1870], trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

Philip Johnson, "House in New Canaan," *The Architectural Review* 108 (September 1950), 152-59.

#### Week 10

Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique [1917]" *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reiss. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3-24.

Peter Eisenman, "Notes on Conceptual Architecture," *Design Quarterly* 78/79 (1970), 1-5.

Assignment #5: Rewrite one page of Eisenman's text using the footnotes, revise the footnotes and erase the new text.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 The forms of language, history and criticism alluded to here are not to be confused with a style of negativity that argues for something "more real." Take Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, which led to many of the hopeful declarations of the Communist Manifesto. And where did that get us? Marx after the *Grundrisse* is far more negative, and he never wrote short easy texts again. In art, some of the most dismissive critics often end up on the side of the real. See Hal Foster's most recent run-in with authenticity in *The Art-Architecture Complex* that ends with an interview of Richard Serra. Foster fawns over the sculptor's work and architects could, he supposes, find their better mirror image there.
- 2 "Real time," for example, is used to invoke the probabilistic gaps in computerized abstract time.

is both the origin of art while also resolutely *not* art). Our discussions will focus on the possibility of exploiting that internal contradiction in producing a uniquely architectural negativity.

#### WEEK 6: BOREDOM

Interest is fleeting, boredom lasts.

#### WEEK 7: DOUBT

Why? That was the question that Claude Perrault asked in the 17<sup>th</sup> century regarding the authority of the ancients over modern views of classical proportion. He wrote, in questioning the defenders of ancient authority, that while natural laws undergird beauty (natural beauty, like in musical proportions), those laws have nothing to do with architecture. Architecture is about norms: social norms and cultural norms. And if architecture is going to be modern, it would be reasonable to doubt the ancients and make it according to modern norms. A more recent doubter is Michael Fried, who all too earnestly pointed to the non-art posture of minimalism and was promptly excluded from the art establishment. But wasn't it his doubt that brought rage to these increasingly institutionalized egos?

#### WEEK 8: DOUBT

Honestly, this course is about a generational shift. Just a decade ago critics were writing about surfing. So how do you kill your surfer-father? Or half-brother? These are questions for Dr. Freud whose patients always came up with great ways to murder loved ones. The last great architectural murder was executed by none other than Le Corbusier, a shot in the temple of the decorative arts.

#### WEEK 9: THEFT

Who ever said that an architect had to be an original author? Isn't it time for us to get over it? All production is ultimately repetition. Lacan introduced the theory of "false self" in 1968 and he was anticipated by the consummately refined performance of Philip Johnson whose historicism must have been shocking in 1949. While nobody can love Johnson-the-man, who can escape the psychoanalytical depth and total masochism that was represented by the Glass House? Sacher-Masoch couldn't have dreamed of a better plot.

#### WEEK 10: THEFT

Monkey wrenches are art. Or so says Mr. Shklovsky. And if there were ever a monkey wrench in architectural theory, it was the moment that Peter Eisenman erased his own theory. What remained was a trace of architecture, architecture in its most pure form: reference. What was conceptual about architecture? It was a self-referential text that represented architecture's conceptual embodiment; its organs/concepts were in its footnotes. Esoteric knowledge refuses to be easy. But architecture is neither cool nor easy. ♦