

Money-tecture...Or How Architecture Is Exploited by Capitalism

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I love architecture. The spaces and forms that make up our built environment provide us not only with the basic requirement of shelter but also with an endless array of experiences. As we consider what is most meaningful in our lives, certainly our experience of architecture—our city streets, the places we call home, our edifices of culture—ranks high on the list of things we value. However, as with most things, our relationship to architecture is complicated, especially in our milieu of capitalist production and consumption. This essay will explore some of those complications, as interpreted through a Marxist lens, and argue that capitalism has exploited architecture, leaving us with only a shell of what could be a rich and fulfilling experience of the built environment. Within this unhappy picture are a few bright spots and possible directions through which architecture could be redeemed.

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To begin, there are at least three ways of thinking about what architecture is. The first definition understands architecture as the buildings that make up our environment. There are arguments about what can be classified as “architecture”—which structures are Architecture versus which are mere buildings—but this definition fundamentally describes an identifiable built *product*. A second definition, probably more accurate, recognizes architecture as a *process*. This understanding takes into account the work of architects to produce drawings, which are made into buildings by the construction industry. In this case, “architecture” is the work done by architects in designing and overseeing construction. Again, there may be argument about

when that process begins and ends, but it can be distinguished from the buildings that may result from the process. Another way of thinking about architecture would be in terms of *production*. This definition could include a number of activities—such as education, publishing, and exhibiting—that accompany the making of buildings and are often carried out by people that are not architects. It also could include a number of products—books, models, websites—that are not buildings. These different ways of understanding architecture begin to hint at how the role of architects and the things that are produced may be open to exploitation.

Turning briefly now to Marx, we will consider his descriptions of exploitation before looking at how it can be understood in connection with architecture. There are two forms of exploitation that I will look at here. The first is the exploitation of labor and the second is the exploitation of value. Regarding the exploitation of labor, in his *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx writes:

With the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men. Labour produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*—and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally. This fact expresses merely that the object which labour produces—labour’s product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour. Labour’s realization is its objectification. In the conditions dealt with by political economy this realization of labour appears as loss of reality for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object* and *object-bondage*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*.¹

This passage outlines what Marx goes on to describe as the exploitation or “alienation” of the worker through the transformation of his labor power into an object. The worker is removed or “estranged” from what was most his—his own productive capacity. His lifeblood has gone into an object that is no longer his.² In this form of exploitation, we give up our labor power to produce a commodity that we do not own, but which sits before us and we are compelled to obtain.

According to Marx, exploitation also takes another form in which truth is divorced from reality. This comes in the divergence of exchange-value from use-value. Marx introduces these terms in the first section of *Capital* in his discussion of commodities. Use-value indicates the objective amount of labor-power put into an item, whereas exchange-value is a subjective amount established through social interaction. The divergence of these two forms of value has a couple of consequences. The first is that commodities may be exchanged at a different rate from what their use-value would indicate—which also serves to obscure the value of labor. A second consequence, which greatly concerned Marx, was that exchange-value, in the form of commodities, would entice production of useful articles solely for the purpose of exchange. “This division of a product into a useful thing and a value becomes practically important, only when exchange has acquired such an extension that useful articles are produced for the purpose of being exchanged, and their character as values has therefore to be taken into account, beforehand, during production.”³ This has further consequences: first that production is modified to result in greater exchange value, and second that it requires labor to both satisfy a social want (i.e. have use-value) and be mutually exchangeable (i.e. have exchange-value). Marx also remarks that these two facets of value have the consequence of making value a “social hieroglyphic” that becomes impossible to decipher. It compels us to ask why are things being produced—because they are useful, or because they can be sold?

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With value impossible to decipher and labor-power estranged from the worker, the door is opened for exploitation. Capitalism is the chief vehicle of exploitation today. While I will not go into the mechanisms of capitalism in this paper, suffice to say that it employs the two strategies outlined above

(exploitation of labor and exploitation of value) to accumulate capital in the form of money. Although Marx does not specifically address architecture, it is now possible to consider a number of interconnected ways in which architecture is exploited.

As Marx suggests, when something becomes a commodity it is on the path to exploitation. This is certainly true for architecture in a variety of ways. In its built form, architecture is commodified when it is bought and sold, or discussed in square feet and number of bathrooms. This is also true at the scale of materials. When a tree is transformed and sold as lumber or clay is made into bricks, the earth is exploited and turned into commodities. As commodities, materials and buildings are exchangeable and become principally thought of in terms of quantified exchange-value rather than for the quality of their use-value. In the same way, the process of architecture can be commodified as the services of architects and designers are measured in hours and productivity. An architect becomes a labor-commodity in the building process as his services are measured for the exchange-value they contribute to a project. This is no truer than in the employment of “starchitects” on contemporary projects to exploit the name brand of certain designers to increase the exchange-value of buildings they work on.⁴ These instances that characterize the commodification of architecture lay the groundwork other means of exploitation.

When buildings are exchanged as commodities for profit, investors and developers begin to play the market in search of profit. This leads to a cycle of real estate investment and dis-investment. Neil Smith identifies this as the pattern of gentrification.⁵ Smith describes gentrification as a cycle that begins with periods of dis-investment during which buildings and properties are intentionally neglected by capital in order to drive down their value. Then, when the value is low and buildings have become derelict, investment returns—often using design as the vanguard—driving the value back up and extracting a profit. In this pattern, architecture is exploited and buildings are held hostage to the profit motive of capitalism. Another pattern that emerges when buildings are treated as commodities—perhaps even more sordid and pervasive—has been identified by David Harvey.⁶ Beginning with Haussmann’s activities to transform Paris, buildings, real estate, and infrastructure have been

used to absorb surplus capital. While at first glance this might appear beneficial to architecture—ready capital allows for heightened architectural development—this activity becomes unsustainable as capital seeks its profit. What seemed to be good for architecture turns out to be a thin mask for capitalist exploitation. By absorbing the surplus capital, buildings and infrastructure provided a safe reservoir to offset the faster-paced cycles of commodity production, but as profit is eventually extracted capital leaves behind cheap, shoddy buildings and sucker-homeowners holding the bag.

But we all get used to this and accept it as the norm. Our acceptance of commodified buildings, cheap construction, and the exploitation of design occurs through a process known as social reproduction. Social reproduction is a complex and dynamic process, but there are a few examples of how norms are established and reinforced that are worth discussing in regards to architecture. One of the ways in which social patterns are established is through the production of desire.⁷ In the realm of architecture and design, desire is produced through ubiquitous media such as home remodeling television shows and images circulated in print. What may begin as desire is reinforced by the limited options people are given when it comes to the built environment. People are induced to consume building products, but their choices are severely limited by standardization and mass production, which again is driven by capitalist profit seeking. Everyone from manufacturers to retailers to construction contractors stand to benefit from offering fewer options and charging a premium for customization. While architecture has the potential to be uniquely adapted to the needs and conditions of its inhabitants, the demand for profit often forces consumers into a box.

While these examples describe the productive and consumptive aspects that shape social reproduction, there are other processes that reinforce social norms in deeper and more subtle ways. Witold Rybczynski discusses how we have slowly come to our contemporary notion of “home” in which everyone is expected to live within a private, individualized sphere.⁸ The possibilities of architecture are weakened by the assumption that every family home must have its kitchen, dining room, master bedroom and bathroom suite, and two-car garage. Although there may be room to negotiate on what

is practical or necessary, architecture is likewise reduced by the social expectations about what a classroom, a hospital room, or an office should be.

This problem is often exacerbated by education in architecture. Some schools of architecture intentionally reproduce the status quo and make no effort to challenge social convention or the forces of capitalism. Other schools are unintentional reproducers—teaching a cannon of design that reinforces the norms without considering the consequences. However, most schools fathom themselves as progressive and challenging, but unable to modify social expectations or stand up to capitalist hegemony, they fall back upon a discourse about styles and formal aesthetics. These schools, while challenging the appearance of architecture, remain within the bounds of what is socially acceptable and expected.

Unfortunately this fallback position of architectural education has a double-edged consequence that opens the door to further exploitation of architecture. On one side, formal arguments about style and aesthetics tend to marginalize design within the larger context of economics and production. These “aesthetic” debates can be written off as frivolous and secondary to practical concerns. At the same time, because design does not actually challenge or modify the practical concerns of how people inhabit places, it can be viewed as unnecessary. The emphasis on aesthetic arguments and the failure to modify practical needs both lead to the same place: design is seen as unnecessary and a waste of money. Unfortunately this has further consequences that intensify exploitation in architecture. When design is perceived as unnecessary, this creates an atmosphere in which architects must constantly justify their services...and reduce their fees. This induces competition among architects and magnifies the degree to which they can be exploited.

This competition further emphasizes style over what little substance might have been possible. Architects compete to produce images that will grab attention and buildings are dressed up to sell. The visual is valued above the tactile—the spectacle over experience.⁹ Emphasis is placed on “innovation” and novelty, which quickens the pace of production and consumption. No time is allowed for research or to develop projects thoroughly. Instead the process is streamlined, buildings are standardized, and perhaps in the most insidious

twist of all, projects are “value engineered.” This term, perfectly descriptive of the process capitalists use to extract the most profit from their projects, confronts architects at every step and aptly summarizes the ways in which architecture is exploited.

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I’ve painted a pretty wretched picture, but is it really all bad? Perhaps not. It is possible to tease out of this rough description of the ways in which architecture is exploited a few ways in which architecture may benefit from its engagement with capitalism. In periods of investment, architecture and the role of architects expands rapidly. In these times, increased production may put greater demands on architects, but it has also generally meant greater opportunity to build and a greater diversity of buildings constructed. Likewise, slow periods of building have often been attributed to the strongest growth in academic and conceptual development in architecture. This view holds that interaction with capital—during boom and bust—is good for architecture as it progresses as a discipline and profession.¹⁰

Another point of view suggests that the portrayal of architecture in the media indicates that there is a growing appreciation for design. As people are more exposed and become more aware, they are more likely to understand and desire to modify their environment. This would re-value design, making it worth the expense, and move it from the margins closer to the center—thereby reversing the pattern of social reproduction and competition described above. In this case, architects become instrumental and architecture plays a role in changing social norms.

A third way of thinking about the significance and sublime beauty of architecture and production is suggested by Walter Benjamin through his use of the notion of phantasmagoria. In one of the most striking passages in his essay, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” Benjamin introduces the concept to describe the experience of the Arcades in Paris—a fantastic architectural space intended as a marketplace for commodities.¹¹ Benjamin is keenly aware of the contradictions inherent in this vivid experience, but unlike some critics who dismiss it outright, Benjamin is drawn to explore this fascinating and dynamic realm of architecture and commodity. As critics like Marshall Berman point out, there is room for a similar approach today.¹² While

it is possible to indicate the ways in which architecture is open to exploitation by capital, it is also possible to experience the heady and often remarkable constructions made possible through capital.

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I would like to make a few more points before drawing to a conclusion. First, it should be clearly noted that architecture is not necessarily the innocent victim in the processes of exploitation I’ve described above. Architecture needs capital to be built and is often willing to make a deal with the capitalist devil in order to be realized. Architecture not only deals with capital out of necessity, but often architecture benefits—at least in the short term—from this relationship. As pointed out above, architecture expands and grows with capital and in some cases architects themselves stand to profit through investment or real estate development. Another example of architecture’s complicity with capital is presented by Anthony Ward who argues that architecture frequently provides a screen for capitalism.¹³ In his examples, he shows how discourses centered on form, function, or linguistics don’t allow for discussion of the needs and people that architecture should serve. He posits that this deception—architecture focused away from people—creates a mask for capital to continue extracting profit, rather than provide for the inhabitants of these projects through a participatory process.

The other issue I would like to briefly discuss before concluding is the question of what is to be done about this situation. The most immediate solution is for the profession to pursue a more participatory approach that better integrates the voices of users and communities. As for broader changes, some critics contend that architecture, as a profession, should be socialized—much like medicine in some parts of the world. The services of architects could be made publicly available and subsidized by the government. To some degree this is the current situation in the Netherlands and was once a possibility in the U.S. in the 1930s. This arrangement would allow designers to address the needs of a far greater and more diverse population and could relieve architecture of the pressure of commodification. Another possibility for disengaging architecture from capitalism is through the intervention of mediating institutions. If organizations such as schools, museums, and not-for-profit design resources were able to buffer architects and

the process of making buildings from the demands of capitalism, it could create a territory in which designers could develop projects and offer services that they would otherwise be unable to do. A third possibility lies in Benjamin's exhortation from the "Author as Producer." Roughly paraphrased, Benjamin argues:

The more completely the architect can orient his work toward mediating activity to adapt the apparatus of production to the purposes of the proletarian revolution, the more correct the political tendency of his work will be, and necessarily also the higher its technical quality.¹⁴

This proposition would require architects to continue their work, but at the same time to refuse the demands of capital, or to turn those requirements towards the aims of revolutionary practices. In so doing, Benjamin imagines that the architect could continue to produce the dynamic and phantasmagoric environment of contemporary life, but transform that environment into a place that encourages the full development of all.

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The relation between architecture and capitalism remains tricky. As with everything capitalism encounters, there is the devastating likelihood of exploitation. Even so, rarely do architects stand in direct conflict with capital—they would be out of work. Unfortunately the engagement of architecture with capitalism up until this point has largely lead to the exploitation of architecture and the extraction of surplus value from buildings and real estate. However, the fundamental creativity inherent in architecture suggests that it may be possible to disengage capital and find better ways of working. If so, architecture would stand to flourish, as would the lives of its inhabitants.

ENDNOTES

1 Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. Tucker (Norton, 1978), 71-72.

2 It is interesting to note that architects are still to some degree associated by name with architecture, whereas factory workers have no association with the products they produce.

3 Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One* (Penguin, 1992 [1867]), 322-323.

4 Note that this is most especially true in the example of residential developers employing well-known architects. I am thinking particularly of Charles Gwathmey, Herzog and de Meuron, Robert Stern and their recent projects in New York City.

5 Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

6 David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (Routledge, 2005).

7 Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986).

8 Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (Viking, 1986).

9 Juhani Pallasmaa, "Toward an Architecture of Humility: On the Value of Experience," in *Judging Architectural Value*, ed. W. Saunders (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 96-103.

10 However, I would argue that this view treats architecture as an end in itself, which seems problematic.

11 Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. P. Demetz (Schocken, 1986).

12 Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1988).

13 Anthony Ward, "The Suppression of the Social in Design," in *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*, ed. Dutton and Mann (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

14 Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. P. Demetz (New York, NY: Schocken, 1986).