

STALKING THE “POLITICAL” IN ARCHITECTURAL DISCOURSE

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A Manifesto for “Organic” Intellectual Practice in the Late 1990s

As Fascist ideology moves once again from veiled menace to bold contender throughout a newly re-capitalized Europe and across the United States, as Mafia henchmen rule the streets of Moscow, as the People's Republic of China offers neither democracy nor socialism, and as the political imaginary of socialism seems unable to conjure a credible emancipating project despite the proliferation of fronts of struggle, a reexamination of the role of culture in Left political organizing is urgent. It would seem, as well, appropriate for this audience, especially as we meet in Berlin — the international meeting ground of famous architects of the past and present, the birthplace of both Marxism and Nazism, and the loci of new European East/West disintegration under the sledge hammer and crippled sickle of that grim reaper, free market capitalism — to discuss “Building as a Political Act.”

Today many architects attempt to theorize and practice a “political” architecture. Evidenced by the rising number of conferences on “critical practices” as well as an architectural media publishing “critical” subjects, it is now commonplace to acknowledge that architecture is political. But what does political mean? Just how critical, or progressive, is this notion of the political? This paper traces the “political” in recent architectural discourse. Through an analysis of discourses and practices claiming to be “political,” our intent is to recoup the militancy of progressivism and to root political discourse in social history, not the academy. We are fully aware of the disagreement with our enthusiasm for this project, but in the spirit of “unity, criticism, unity” we hope to elevate the level of exchange on this question.

Our investigation relating form-making, discourse, and political life addresses here published venues of dialogues about politics and architecture to which we can all make common reference: The debate about the social production of persona, initiated by Diane Ghirardo in *Progressive Architecture* (November 1994), with responses by Peter Eisenman and associates in *Progressive Architecture* (February 1995), and the *Assemblage* 27

publication of “The Tulane Papers: The Politics of Contemporary Architectural Discourse.”

We theorize these venues in light of our own text *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*.¹ Concerned with the global transformations of the political economy, culture, and more pointedly, the rise of discursive hegemony in intellectual discourse, *Reconstructing Architecture* attempts to coalesce the strategies of feminism, critical theory, racial and ethnic studies, cultural studies, deconstruction, and environmentalism in order to rebuild, not redeem, the social project of architecture.

Equally important, we seek to theorize from our respective points of practice. We are situated, allied, affiliated; partisans in an urban confrontation others among us seek to neutralize rather than engage. That is, we theorize the world scene, architecture, and architectural discourse from points of practice in which we engage in the building of social movements in our respective geographies.

Since 1981 Tom has worked closely with community groups in the Over-the-Rhine district of Cincinnati to advance plans for physical and social rejuvenation. A predominately low/moderate income neighborhood, adjacent to the central business district of Cincinnati and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Over-the-Rhine has all the consequences one would expect of a “run-down” community. But, the community is organized: approximately 12 progressive groups based in social service, community education, landlord/tenant relations, religion, and affordable housing development are linked into what is known as The Over-the-Rhine People's Movement. The Movement is constantly under attack as it addresses gentrification, displacement, homelessness, housing abandonment, CBD expansion, the neglect of absentee landlords, the disregard of some city planners and officials, the wholesale sell-out of groups such as the Urban Land Institute, and a vast swelling nihilism in the general population.

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“think-tank/act-tank” that develops policy around critical issues that affect low-income people, workers, and people of color, initiates social equity campaigns in Los Angeles County, and facilitates the creation of mass membership organizations to carry out these campaigns, most recently the campaign for transportation equity that launched the Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles and enabled its success in the civil rights lawsuit *Labor Community Strategy Center v. Metropolitan Transit Authority*. The decree not only cuts fares, but secures and expands the bus transportation infrastructure of the Los Angeles region and places the union in a joint Working Group. The changes will impact the urban fabric of the city in ways we cannot yet imagine. Given the great variety of cultures and languages of its scholars and organizers, its in-house students and nationwide readers, and the regional communities it addresses, the Labor Community Strategy Center devotes considerable resources to experimentation with the power of art and culture for community education and organizing, including the development of multilingual programs, productions, publications, and visual arts.

Our purpose here is polemical, because it is in the arena of academic discourse that the term “political” is so vulgarized and abused that we hardly recognize it. We are both architects and academics who theorize, teach, and write about form-making as political practice. Within the context of the international cross-discipline dialogue about the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of intellectuals, we each conceive of our own work as organic intellectual practice, in the Gramscian sense. We affirm this sense, not because we are disciples of Antonio Gramsci, but because it functions as a common reference point for progressives around the world attempting a particular form of intellectual practice.

The term “organic intellectual” comes from Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist leader of communist and workers movements whose legacy, *The Prison Notebooks*, were written in Mussolini’s prison system during the last 11 years of his life. For Gramsci, the concept of the organic intellectual functioned as a tentative answer to the question of developing revolutionary *popular* consciousness. Gramsci’s intellectuals were both leading and representative, as he understood theory to reach its greatest clarity when embodied in specific collective actions. His “new type of intellectual” could only be produced through the school of political struggle. As he wrote in “Problems of Marxism,” “The intellectual’s error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned: In other words that the intellectual can be an intellectual if distinct and separate from the people-nation, i.e., without feeling the elementary passions of the people ... One cannot make politics-history without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation.”² This mode of being an active participant in practical life, as an organizer and not simply as an orator, highlights the intellectual’s responsibility to disseminate knowledge and ideas for the purpose of political strategy. This attempt to ground the intellectual function within the organized struggles for social change is what makes the intellectual role “organic.” Gramsci’s account of the organic intellectual comes

closest to expressing what it is we are trying to do in our practices.

Discourse, Form, Politics, and Intellectual Practice

The architectural press — scholarly, trade, and independent — continually usurps the terminology of revolutionary social movements to describe simple innovation, stellar personality, and doctrinal debate over architectural ideology: admittedly, such association does sell magazines. But some of us should care enough about our work to raise the level of collective exchange and take more responsibility for our own actual “political” practices. We think there is value in revisiting a few examples.

We viewed the Ghirardo/Eisenman exchange published in *Progressive Architecture* as part of its dying scene. Diane Ghirardo provocatively dissected the social production of Peter Eisenman, followed by his response and seventeen others (a bolder display of the “immanence” of content in form — to shove the responses of 18 people into the “equal space” of one — is difficult to imagine). Ghirardo’s strength was her focus on the political economy of the relations of production in the architecture industry, a vantage point desperately lacking in our discourse and one from which a critique of Eisenman’s interventions can easily be made. Eisenman’s counter was to pose the question: *can form be defined politically, or conversely, can form be autonomous?* In answer to this question, near unilateral agreement emerged among Eisenman’s chosen respondents. Jennifer Bloomer wrote “that almost every human act has political dimensions,” and Mark Wigley agreed, “There is no formalism without a certain politics.” To support the view of the inescapable link between form and politics, many responders cautioned against the “questionable [western] philosophical tradition that separates form from content,” or “the bourgeois incapacity to think in other than the most compartmentalized and undialectical categories.”

On this we agree. But when we read deeper, we found something disturbing. What worries us is the desire to dissolve “the tedious opposition between theory and practice,” or what amounts to the same thing, to conflate form and content into one indistinguishable entity. We believe it still important to maintain a theoretical distance between form and content, to have them constitute a particular dialectical relationship, but not a unitary identity. Failure to maintain distinction can lead to false equations, to assume, for example, that radical form entails a radical politics. Thus, we argue, yes, form is always political, it has political effects and consequences, but this does not mean automatically (as K. Michael Hays suggests) that a concern for form entails a concern for social issues.

To talk of politics and social issues with regards to form requires conscious, explicit theorizing. We found little of this when we combed through the *PA* responses. Indeed, most seem content to leave the matter at that most banal of levels, that form and politics are related: Period, end of discussion. Not to go beyond this, not to take the next step and to ask what kind of politics are worth the struggle, not to ask how form can contribute

to transformative social direction is never to surpass the level of liberal humanism, regardless of the posthumanist rhetoric. For us, the issue is not whether form is political, but what particular politics are being subscribed to and actually produced through formal interventions on practical political terrain. Few responders even hinted that such questions matter, let alone took them up seriously.

A handful did assert architecture's responsibility to rethink the political. For example, John Rajchman suggested that architectural thought should direct itself to a "radical-democratic conception of the political," and Hays proposed that formalism should be "grasped as a properly political anticipation of new social relations, against and beyond the limits of our present ways of life." Having said this, however, Hays pulled his punches when it came to articulating the actual substance of his "anticipations." We always find it curious that in calls to rethink the political there is no reference to the need for architecture to link with progressive social and political movements, which could invigorate the intellectual life of architecture's self-identified theorists of the "political." Is Hays advancing a progressive politics? If so, then the question becomes more interesting: What theories of form-making make it possible to "think the social relations" of an anti-Fascist, anti-capitalist internationalist social movement at this moment in history?

We hoped to find this question addressed in a rethinking of the political at the Tulane retreat of the *Assemblage* editorial board. Published in *Assemblage* as "The Tulane Papers: The Politics of Contemporary Architectural Discourse," the exchange responded to the question posed by Catherine Ingraham: *what is the political dimension of scholarly work in architecture?* No surprise appeared illustrating actual engagement of these would-be scholars in the political life of cities, movements, peoples. Yet the resultant political position of the discourse on architecture was reaffirmed. This strategy of negation is a resistance (not to bourgeois social life by means of social praxis but) to bourgeois philosophy by means of the formal subversion of architecture's language as a foundational metaphor for the bourgeois philosophical order.

Acknowledging unanimously again an inevitable linkage between architecture and politics, one group of theorists continued to appropriate Althusser to argue for the relative autonomy of architectural ideology and the critical/political nature of intellectual practices (as well as design strategies) that undermine the dominant ideologies within architecture (not society) while another group advanced a practice (couched as a critique) of "ideological smoothness," that is, accepting that architecture may indeed be determined (not by Althusser's economy but) by culture, particularly media. Hays, occupying the Left wing with his "vestigial Marxism" focused on questioning *who is the audience of this new consensus?*² He described an audience in which "modes of cultural expression ... have been blurred, in which high and low, hip and nerd, Left and Right, have all but lost their distinctions, in which ... the mapping of the real becomes indistinguishable from the real itself. What is more," he continued, "the loss of 'reality' that comes with

this indistinguishability is something some of us have learned to like."³

Hays's identification of such an audience mirrors larger, disturbing trends in intellectual criticism generally. Much of the practice of intellectual criticism is enveloped in a language of radical resistance that legitimates its isolation from material action; it is a fervor mainly of the discursive realm. Called "textualization," this intellectual practice now approaches the framing of a discursive hegemony. Scholars across such divergent terrains as history, cultural studies, literary criticism, and the social sciences refer now to the "linguistic turn," the "discursive models of culture," the "textualizing of context," and the "deconstructive deluge" in the scholarship of their fields.

Intellectual work is in full dress retreat from material, organic intervention. Overt political radicalism is displaced by textual radicalism. Robert Scholes, looking at life within university departments of English and the humanities, points to the "deconstructive turn" in academic work and the "irresistible" appeal that deconstructive discourse has within the academy: "Political radicalism may thus be drained off or sublimated into a textual radicalism that can happily theorize its own disconnection from unpleasant realities."⁴

This is not a problem of theory. Great advances in theorizing race, class, gender, subjugation, domination, exclusion, marginality, and Otherness in quite progressive ways have occurred in many fields. But as Stuart Hall laments with regards to his terrain of cultural studies, "There is hardly anything in cultural studies which isn't so theorized. And yet, there is the nagging doubt that this overwhelming textualization of cultural studies' own discourses somehow constitutes power and politics as exclusively matters of language and textuality itself."⁵ Adolph Reed cautions similarly with regard to African-American Studies, especially the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr. Reed's concern is that Gates privileges African American culture as a matter of literary canons and texts. In doing so, the writer is elevated "to the dubious role of 'point of consciousness' for the race and puts literary form ahead of political agency. The overall result of this approach ... is a depoliticized brand of scholarship that diverts attention away from concrete political actions, while still taking advantage of a vague aura of political commitment."⁶

In our own field, one approach to textualization is aesthetic formalism. Of concern to us here is the industry of critical interrogation divorced from acts of critical construction in the social world. Consider some recent investigations into gender and feminism in architecture—Beatriz Colomina's *Sexuality and Space* and Francesca Hughes's book, *The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice*. In her review of *Sexuality and Space* in the inaugural issue of *Harvard Design Magazine*, Elizabeth Wilson cautions about the use of "theory without consequences," wherein it can be "thrillingly seen as 'transgressive' while remaining devoid of any calls to action or any social or moral imperatives. Truly a theory for our post-political times."⁷

Diane Ghirardo, commenting on *The Architect* has harsher words: "What marginalizes this work is less its content than its resilient pursuit of the fashionable instead

of anything remotely resembling a political agenda or critique, inside or outside of architecture." Ghirardo offers her observations "less to dismiss this work than to ask what it might have to say to a female architect, student, or faculty member subjected to all sorts of subtle and not-so-subtle harassment based on gender."⁸

Textualization — the retreat into discourse, where matters of politics are spun within language games not really meant to be fused with those embroiled in daily struggle — is not new, of course. Edward Said raised alarms about trends towards discursive hegemony long ago. Writing in the early 1980s in Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Said criticized the tendency of "intellectual discourse existing solely within an academy that has left the extra-academic outside world to the new Right and to Reagan." Countering "cloistral seclusion from the inhospitable world of real politics," Said challenged intellectuals to connect their "politically vigilant forms of interpretation to an ongoing political and social praxis. Short of making that connection, even the best-intentioned and the cleverest interpretive activity is bound to sink back into the murmur of mere prose."⁹

This captures, precisely, the politics of contemporary architectural discourse. If the architectural project is not grounded someplace in order to advance particular social relations and institutional arrangements, then architecture merely becomes empty discursive activity, charmed by producing the *concept* of new relations rather than the actual relations themselves. In this sense, architecture is cut adrift from real, material efforts to change the world.

Herein lies the worst conceptual error, an error not only symptomatic of the naiveté of modernism, but which may be modernism's "cardinal sin." That is how social theorist Fredric Jameson puts it: the cardinal sin is to "identify (or conflate) the political and the aesthetic, and to foresee a political and social transformation that is henceforth at one with the formal processes of architectural production itself."¹⁰ Thus it is (unwittingly perhaps) that Eisenman and responders end up advocating a position not unlike that of Le Corbusier, who it will be recalled, was not against political revolution but rather, quoting Jameson, "saw the construction and the constitution of new space as the most revolutionary act, and one that could 'replace' the narrowly political revolution of the mere seizure of power."¹¹ Without any attempt to ground progressive-political vision in the body politic and struggle of social movement, such work reproduces transcendental idealism, where anything becomes possible by the stroke of the pen. Without grounding, what results is the architecture of formal aestheticism, where theoretical and formal experimentation conceived in the private and detached shadows that at best can only serve a discursive radicalism, acts as a substitute for material affiliation with political realities.

Reconstructing Architecture As Organic Intellectual Practice

Recognizing that the path forward cannot take us back to humanisms or modernisms already known, architecture's social project must be reconstructed. In the wake of the collapse of socialism's first experiments,

the social project of architecture — to the extent that it is critically transformed to seek radical societal change within the most advanced forms of modern capitalism — orients the practice of those who envision a future that is not a past.

We are not heartened by the political stance of recent intellectual work that addresses the "political." To our minds the *disconnection* of theorizing from concrete social action renders the strategies to undermine the ideologies of architecture, much less capitalism, impotent.

The political valence of architectural theorizing today has shifted away from the *critique of society* that did develop strategies for architecture's progressive social agency to a *critique of language* that retreats from the inhumane forces of modern life, a nonetheless profoundly social act, all in the name of the political. Given the structural parameters of society and the textualization of intellectual discourse, organic intellectual practice promotes a coalition culture based in the voluntary unity of those who know from life experience the difference between the undeniable fragmentation and contradiction actually constituting the false whole of Western culture and the appearance or *style* of fragmentation masking the concrete totality of history. Thus, criticism of the tendency toward false totality is always coupled with dialectical historical realization of the inevitable constructive nature of human activity as strategy.

This is the ground-plane from which *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices* contributes toward coalescing a movement of those progressives among us who are specifically seeking to reconstruct architecture's social project. Our goal is not to restore some past historical moment, but rather to rebuild a project in this period of late capitalism. This work encompasses a wide spectrum of views, theories, and practices. But we share a common purpose: To examine the political economy of the profession and to join with all practitioners who are critical of architecture's alignment with the reactionary forces of our time in seeking a socially progressive future.

In closing, our approaches follow the path of those producers of material culture who allied closely with political organizations and social movements, using art and architecture to organize and educate so as to effect social change. We strive for a critical constructive practice of architecture that, based in cultures' critiques, reorients subjectivities while affirming the oppositional cultures of social movements existing in the present.

NOTES

¹ Thomas A. Dutton and Lian Hurst Mann, *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

² Antonio Gramsci, "Problems of Marxism," *Selections from Political Writings* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

³ K. Michael Hays, in *Assemblage 27* "The Tulane Papers: The Politics of Contemporary Architectural Discourse," p. 44.

⁴ Robert Scholes, "Deconstruction and Communication," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Winter 1988), p. 284-85.

- ⁵ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 286.
- ⁶ Scott Sherman, "Fighting Words: Adolph Reed's Crusade Against the New Black Intellectuals," *Lingua Franca* (March 1997), p. 47-48.
- ⁷ Elizabeth Wilson, in *Harvard Design Magazine* (Winter/Spring 1997), p. 72.
- ⁸ Diane Ghirardo, in *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- ⁹ Edward Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 149, 158.
- ¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology," in Joan Ockman, ed., *Architecture Criticism Ideology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985), pp. 71-72.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.