

The Drama of Architectural Utopia

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Abstract

Utopia is nothing other than a structural vision of the totality that is, and is becoming, the transcendence of the pure datum, and a system of orientation intent upon breaking the relationships of the existing order.

One is left to navigate an empty space in which anything can happen but nothing is decisive. This does not mean that a lucid awareness of the present situation is not necessary. Doing away with outdated myths, one certainly does not see, on the architectural horizon, any ray of an alternative; of a technology of our own. We must proceed to the analysis that, in the field of architecture, activities are only today being attempted with the necessary precision and coherence. For those anxiously seeking an operative criticism, the problems are deliberately treated, but in a historical outline.

Attacking the subject of architectural ideology from this point of view means trying to explain why the apparently most functional proposals for the reorganization of this sector of capitalist development have had to suffer the most humiliating frustrations – why they can be presented even today as purely objective proposals devoid of any class connotation, or as mere alternatives. Many of the new ideas on architecture have been gleaned from an accurate reexamination of the origins of the historical avant-garde movements. The entire cycle of modern architecture can be viewed as a unitary development. This makes it possible to consider globally the formation of architectural ideologies and, in particular, their implication for the city.

Keywords:

Architectural ideology, urban fragment, dis-articulation of form, utopian realism

Enlightenment Architecture

Enlightenment architecture seems to warn of the imminent danger of losing the organic quality of form. It was now the ideal of totality and universality that was in crisis. Systematic research on Enlightenment architecture has been able to identify a great many of the contradiction that in diverse forms accompany the course of contemporary art. The formation of the architect as an ideologist of society, the persuasive role of form in regard to the critical role of form, in regard to its own problems and development, the interrelationship and opposition between architectural object and urban organization; these are the constantly recurrent themes of the Enlightenment dialectic on architecture.

Laugier's call to naturalism is an appeal to the original purity of the act of designing the environment, and shows an understanding of the preeminently anti-organic quality of the city. But there is still more. The reducing of the city to a natural phenomenon is a response to the aesthetic of the picturesque, which English empiricism had introduced as

early as the first decades of the 18th. Century, and which was given elaborate and coherent theoretical foundation by the English painter Alexander Cozens.

For the 18th Century theorist, there was no question that the city falls within the same formal area as painting. Selectivity and criticism therefore signified the introduction into urban planning of a fragmentation that places on the same level, not only nature and reason, but also natural fragment and urban fragment.

By renouncing a symbolic role, at least in the traditional sense, architecture – in order to avoid destroying itself – discovered its own scientific calling. On one hand, it could become the instrument of social equilibrium and it has to face the question of building types, and it could become a science of sensations. All forms of classical derivation are treated as mere fragments, as deformed symbols, as a hallucinating organism of an order in a state of decay. The order in detail creates a monstrous pollution of symbols devoid of significance which can lead to deformation even if its goal be the sublime.

Rationalism attempted to absorb all of its own irrationality in architectural reasoning and applies the technique of shock to its very foundations. Individual architectural fragments push one against the other, while as an accumulation demonstrate the uselessness of the inventive effort expended on their formal definition.

Enlightenment architecture from the very beginning postulated one of the concepts fundamental to the development of contemporary art; the disarticulation form and the anti-organic quality of structure. On the other hand, the breaking of the organic character of form was concentrated in the architectural operation. The fact that architecture could respond to the universe of precision with nothing more than an approximation is not surprising. It was in reality the urban structure, in its registration of the conflicts created the victory of technological progress, which had radically changed. But architecture, at least as traditionally conceived, is a stable structure, which gives form to permanent values and consolidates urban morphology.

The ideologists of radical or humanitarian convictions were indeed free to exhibit the irrationality of the industrial city. But this they could do only by forgetting that this irrationality was such only for an observer disposed to delude himself of being. Humanitarian utopianism and radical criticism had unexpected effect: This problem is intrinsic to the formation of the urban ideology. Responses of the criticism to the problem around which utopian thought was obliged to turn incessantly had two immediate consequences for the formation of new urban ideologies:

First, by considering the general problems in strictly structural terms, it made evident the checkmate to which utopia condemned itself revealing the secret will to arrive at the brink of destruction implicit in the utopian hypothesis. Second, by doing away with the romantic dream of a mere incidence of subjective action on the destiny of society, the fact that the very concept of destiny in a creation, stemming from the new relationships of production, became clear to bourgeois thought. As a sublimation of real phenomena, the courageous acceptance of destiny – a fundamental of the bourgeois ethic – was able to redeem the misery and impoverishment which that destiny itself had induced at all levels of civil life, and above all in its architectural form: the city.

The Modern Movement

The end of utopianism and the birth of realism are not distinct moments within the process of ideological formation of the modern movement. Rather, beginning in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, realistic utopianism and utopian realism overlap and complement one another. The decline of the social utopian sanctioned ideology's surrender to the politics of things brought about by the laws of profit. Architectural, artistic, and urban ideology was left with the utopia of form as a way of recovering the human totality through an ideal synthesis, as a way of embracing disorder through order. Modern architecture as a whole had the means to create an ideological situation ready to fully integrate design with the reorganization of production, distribution, and consumption in the new capitalist city.

In order to survive, ideology had to negate itself, break its own crystalized forms, and move to the construction of the future. Nietzsche's tragic disenchantment is the most radical manifesto of the rejection of any compromise between science and ideology. This is why Mannheim was obliged to offer a mystified version of the functioning and reality of utopia.

Conservative thought on the other hand deduced the significance of the particular from something that stands behind it, from the past or from that which already exists at least in embryonic form. Utopia is therefore nothing other than a structural vision of the totality that is and is becoming, the transcendence of the pure datum, and a system of orientation intent upon breaking the relationships of the existing order. The criticism of conservative thought thus becomes a necessity, an instrument for liberating the dynamic functioning of the system.

The contradiction still existing in Mannheim utopia as a model entirely in the real dynamics of politic-economic anticipation projected into the future. Mannheim expresses the awareness of a discrepancy, which still represents a danger. Mannheim's criticism of ideology is consistent with the intension of rendering scientific the political control over the dynamics of the system.

But with Keynes and Weber, the road is already marked out utopia must work within the field of programing and must abandon the field of general ideology. But, even Mannheim works within Weber's hypothesis of intellectual work that rejects any negative utopia. Seen in this light, Mannheim's criticism of ideology is consistent with the intention of rendering scientific the political control over the dynamic system.

The specific aim of Futurism and Dada was just such a deserialization of values, considered to be the new, unique value. For Ball as for Tzara, the destruction and the rendering ridiculous of the historic heritage of the Western bourgeois were conditions for the liberation of the potential, but inhibited, energies of that bourgeoisie itself. The Dadaist revolutionary vitality much more than that of the Surrealists, lies precisely in the courage to explode the contradiction which belongs to the system by placing itself before it as reality. Liberation from value in this sense signifies establishing the premises for action in that reality, in that field of indeterminate fluid, and ambiguous forces. The promise of liberation from the machine can only arise from an accurately controlled

image of the future. Demolishing the old orders and stressing reality as the realm of absurdity the avant-garde threw itself into ideological anticipations, into partial utopias of the plan.

This ideology does away with any utopian model and any possibility of the development of ideology itself. Ideology became concrete and stripped of any trace of utopianism now descends directly into individual fields of endeavors; which is the same as saying that it is suppressed. The ideologies of the avant-garde, introduced as a proposal for social behavior, was the transformation of traditional ideology into utopia, as a prefiguration of abstract final moment of development coincident with a global rationalization, with a positive realization of the dialectic. The gap widens between the institutions that realize the plan technically and those that control the dynamics of it.

It must be emphasized that in such criticism, the work of the intellectuals seems to have been directed to devising hypothesis intended for the most part to re-dimension cultural work itself. The real problem was one of taking sides on the question of whether or not intellectual work should be political. In 1924 in the second Surrealist manifest, Andre Breton recognized that thought “cannot do other than oscillate between the awareness of its perfect autonomy and that of its strict dependence”.

The intellectual work

Formalism and Surrealism agreed in defending the professionalism of intellectual work. The only difference is that the former, with greater courage, succeeded in confessing its own tautological character, its own out-datedness, while the latter elected to set itself up as the emblem of an intellectual bad conscience. We are here faced with two tendencies, following two different and complementary directions that were to be perpetuated up to our own day: the first, the self- recognition of intellectual work as essentially works pure and simple, and therefore not something able to serve revolutionary movement. The autonomy of such work is recognized explicitly as relative; only the political or economic patron being able to give a sense to the efforts of the intellectual disciplines.

The second, an intellectual work that negates itself as such, claiming a position of pure ideology, and that itself wants to substitute the political organization or criticize it from within. Its objective, however, is always to get out of productive work and stand before it as its critical conscience. There thus arises the problem of mediation between these two positions. This is the great theme of Benjamin, of Constructivist art and architecture of the social-democratic techniques of administration of the city, as well as of the urban utopias of Central Europe of the 1930's.

These two movements have but, one ultimate significance. The intellectual avant-garde had to occupy an area from which until now it had attentively kept its distance; that of work. The discovery of the fundamental symbolic quality and the ambiguity of architecture languages, the attempts at measuring their quantum of communication by means of information theory, and the connecting of their capacity of communication to a departure from the established code formed the fundamentals of the new techniques of analysis. But they also provoked a series of collateral effects that must be adequately evaluated.

The formal approach to problems of aesthetic communication offered a formidable theoretical basis to the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. The influence of the theories of Futurism is only one particularly evident example of this, because the relationship between art and the techniques of analysis are very clear and verifiable historically, but the entire theory of the avant-garde can be read in this light.

Architectural semiology

It must be born in mind that the areas of pertinence relative to grammar, logic, and semiology, was thus to enable to indicate the conditions of manipulability of the pure sign devoid of any symbolic implication, of any semantic reference. The fact is that the discovery of the possibility of inflecting signs devoid of any significance, of manipulating arbitrary relationships between linguistic materials in themselves mute or different, did away with any pretense of architecture as a political expression or protest. The only utopia the architecture of the avant-garde was able to proffer was the technological utopia.

The complete independence of the sign and its manipulation are at the base not only of semiology and behavioral analysis, but also the passage of avant-garde architecture into the realms of production and publicity. It is hardly by chance that the sector of visual communication most directly connected to the realm of production was the one to be most affected.

Architecture, as an element of the urban phenomenon fell here even in this field to the entire heritage of the avant-garde movements. For example, Le Corbusier's complex relationship with Cubism and Surrealism. But it was also in the field of architecture that the great contradiction arose in the relations between linguistic analysis and production systems. Once architecture was materially inserted into the mechanisms of the universe of production, its own experimental character was necessarily compromised. It is at this point that there occurred a breakdown between linguistics and architecture.

If architecture can be interpreted in its specific aspects only as linguistic experimentation, which is realized only through an obliqueness, through a radical ambiguity in the organization of its components, and, finally, if the linguistic material is indifferent and matters only in the way the various materials react with each other, then the only road to be followed is that of the most radical and politically agnostic formalism. In other words, the formalism most distant, by free and conscious choice, from the very reality that makes it possible for architecture to exist.

The fact is that the entire modern movement postulates an internal criticism of its own process. And it is also well known that the assumption of the task of criticism on the part of architecture has always corresponded to an annulment of criticism itself. The attempt to revitalize architecture by means of an exploration of its internal structures comes about just at the moment when avant-garde studies in the linguistic field are abandoning ambiguous communications and taking their place in the heart of the productive universe through the creation of artificial programming languages.

From the utopian model, the aim of which is the prefiguration of a total resolution of the technological universe, avant-garde architecture is reduced to an appendage of that universe in the course of the latter's realization. Rediscovering a possible avant-garde role for architecture, and concurrently turning to the use of the analytical instruments of the science of communication, has meant opening a gap between some new experiences and the traditional utopia of the modern movement. At the same time, it has also meant returning to those internal contradictions with which formalisms had already collided.

We should not be scandalized by that. Rather, what amazes is that architectural criticism does not go to the root of the matter and has need to hide behind new ideological schemes borrowed from the semiology approach.

Through semiology architecture seeks its own meaning, while tormented by the sense of having lost its meaning altogether. In this is clearly to be seen a further contradiction. An architecture that has accepted the reduction of its own elements to pure signs, and the construction of its own structure as an ensemble of tautological relationships that refer to themselves in a maximum of negative entropy, according to the language of information theory, cannot turn to reconstructing other meanings through the use of analytic techniques which have their origins in the application of neo-positivist theories.

It should be noted that the artistic conception of indeterminateness, of the open-ended works of ambiguity raised to an institution, is concentrated precisely in fields defined by the new techniques of man-machine communication. It is no longer ideology that, after having assumed utopian connotations, suggests new lines of work to the programmers work on the materials of communication no longer serves as an anticipation of the lines of development. Excluded from development, ideology turns against development itself.

Conclusion

A completely structuralism criticism can never explain the sense of a work. It can do no more than describe it, since the only logic at its disposal is that based on yes-no, correct-incorrect, precisely analogous to the mathematical logic that guides the functioning of an electronic brain. There is but one contribution a consistent structuralism can offer to present day architecture and art.

Building production taken as an element of comprehensive planning continues to reduce the usefulness of architectural ideology. On the other hand, economic and social contradictions, which explode in an always more accelerated way within urban agglomerations, seem to halt capitalist reorganization. Faced with the rationalization of the urban order, present day political-economic forces demonstrate that they are not interested in finding the ways and means to carry out tasks indicated by the architectural ideologies of the modern movement.

The fact is that, for architects, the discovery of their decline as active ideologists, the awareness of the enormous technological possibilities available for rationalizing cities and territories coupled with the daily spectacle of their waste, and the fact that specific design methods become outdated even before it is possible to verify their underlying hypotheses in reality, all create an atmosphere of anxiety. And ominously present on the

horizon is the worst of the evils, the decline of the architect's professional status and his introduction into programs where the ideological role of architecture is minimal.

Contemporary technology indeed permits the imagination to take over. The creative imagination becomes the same as the planetary conscience. The prospective aesthetic is the vehicle of man's greatest hope, his collective liberation.