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Looking for the Outside: "How Is Architecture Political?"

On December 5, 2014, to a packed audience at the Architectural Association in London, four architectural theorists—Reinhold Martin, Ines Weizman, Pier Vittorio Aureli, and Sarah Whiting—responded to the provocations of philosopher Chantal Mouffe, and faced her replies in turn. The event, titled "How Is Architecture Political?" was the second of the Architecture Exchange series, which pits architectural theorists against the philosophers they reference. With the aim of producing substantive philosophical debate and an assessment of interdisciplinary translation, the organizers Joseph Bedford, Jessica Reynolds, Umberto Bellardi Ricci, and Shumi Bose invited theorists influenced by Mouffe to represent opposing positions. The audience may well have expected an animated case-in-point of agonistic democracy, if not a dogfight, but found instead a remarkably consensual conversation. The event, which exposed the limitations of Mouffe's position for architecture, also showed the danger of consensus in discourses on architecture and politics.

Chantal Mouffe's influence on the field of architecture has stemmed largely from her articulation of an agonistic model of democracy. In writings such as *The Democratic Paradox* (2000) and *On the Political* (2005), she critiques the models of deliberative democracy put forward by John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas for their emphases on rational debate and normative consensus. As with the *agon* described by Hannah Arendt, these deliberative models rely on ideal political realms, in which individuals leave behind private interests and participate in enlightened debate. Responding to the pluralistic complexity of late capitalist globalization, Mouffe instead embraces the conflicting interests of adversarial groups. While *antagonism* is confrontation between enemies, *agonism* is negotiation between conflicting parties sharing the same goal of democracy. Democracy becomes a practice that is constructed out of social relations, and that constantly challenges and revises hegemonic conditions. This shift from deliberation to agonism, from public consensus to private interests, from a democratic ideal to a democratic practice, provided fodder for certain parallel transitions in architecture's political ambitions from the 1990s to early 2000s. The demise of "the critical," as it has often been put, inspired many thinkers to shift from a seemingly removed position of analysis and critique toward an engagement with realpolitik (replacing "the critical" with "the projective"), a

Chantal Mouffe delivers her response to presenters and the audience. Image © AAlog: http://aalog. net/?p=18969.

turn within which there remained a broad spectrum from critical to opportunistic. In gathering this group of leading theorists on the conjunction of architecture and politics, the Architecture Exchange event produced not only an assessment of Mouffe's relevance but also, and perhaps inadvertently, an assessment of the commonalities and limitations along this spectrum.

In presenting responses to Mouffe at the Architecture Exchange, the four theorists staked out disparate positions between the poles of engagement and autonomy. In *The Organizational Complex* and *Utopia's Ghost,* Reinhold Martin has established his political role as an incisively Foucauldian and Marxist critic of late capitalism, revealing how hegemonic structures shape architectural space at every scale. In his writings on Occupy Wall Street, Martin points architectural agency toward the economic mechanisms behind architectural form, asking architects to contribute "knowledge of the economic and governmental structures that have inscribed housing and cities within the closed circles of capital accumulation." [1] This focus on collusions of states and markets tends to downplay the agency of individual architectural choices, but in his talk at the Architecture Exchange, Martin shifted from the macro to the micro and opened a window for smaller-scale action. Furthering the argument from Arendt and Mouffe that politics has shifted from a public space of appearance to the private economy of the household, Martin moved from the Greek *agon* to the question of housing. Expressing new interest in domestic space, he argued that the problems of the public realm are doomed to repeat themselves unless we restructure the private repetitions of the social: the "small, technical acts by which we are governed."

In keeping with his sympathies toward certain strands of Italian Marxism, Aureli has been known to launch similarly devastating critiques of architecture's imbrication with late capitalism, particularly in the form of rampant urbanization. His solution, as outlined in *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* and *The Project of Autonomy*, has been formalist autonomy, through architecturally constituted islands that materially and spatially separate from the sea of urbanization. Like Martin, however, Aureli's presentation at the Architecture Exchange emphasized not the urban scale but the power of interior walls and thresholds, which are capable of demarcating social relations within the private sphere.

[1] Reinhold Martin, "Occupy: What Architecture Can Do," *Places Journal* (November 2011), https://placesjournal.org/article/occupy-what-architecture-can-do/.

In contrast to these emissaries of *critique*, Sarah Whiting continues to endorse engagement through architectural practice, locating agency in both economic strategy and formal, geometric organization. Accepting architecture's inevitable entanglement with capital, she advocates for projective practice, seeing the mechanisms of planning, funding, designing, and constructing architecture as the tools for altering the politics of both public and private spaces. In London, she emphasized the ways in which Mouffe can be read as a foundational thinker for the projective, in her focus on not just critique but also asserting new ordering systems. As Mouffe has argued, one can never fully escape conditions of hegemony but can only critique and reconstitute slightly better hegemonic orders. Architectural practice, then, for Mouffe and Whiting, as well as Martin and Aureli, is an attempt to reconfigure the given conditions of late capitalism with informed awareness of its unavoidable constraints.

But Ines Weizman delivered the wild card of the session—a presentation on dissident architects in the USSR who switched the context from capitalist to communist, and the strategy from construction to rebellion. Her slides of riotously colorful and ornate drawings constituted the aporia of the day, a proclamation of the value of speculative paper architecture in the face of debates about negotiating with a discipline compromised by capitalism. She effectively rendered "authoritarian neo-liberalism" as little different from Soviet Communism, and insisted on the need not to critique or to engage but to *dissent*.

Chantal Mouffe's subsequent talk and the group discussion that followed constructed a growing consensus on architecture's relation to politics, with Weizman's presentation as the noticeable exception. In addressing architecture's role in politics, Mouffe called for continual "disarticulation," or analytical critique, of how cultural practices construct hegemonic order, and expressed appreciation for Martin and Aureli's contributions on this basis. She also reminded the audience that "disarticulation" must also be followed by "re-articulation," or the construction of new, inevitably all-encompassing orders, as with Whiting's insistence on the projective. The argument that hegemony cannot be escaped, but only critiqued and reconstructed, is key to the sense of confined radicalism that pervaded the event. In their own terms, Martin, Aureli, and Whiting all share this double
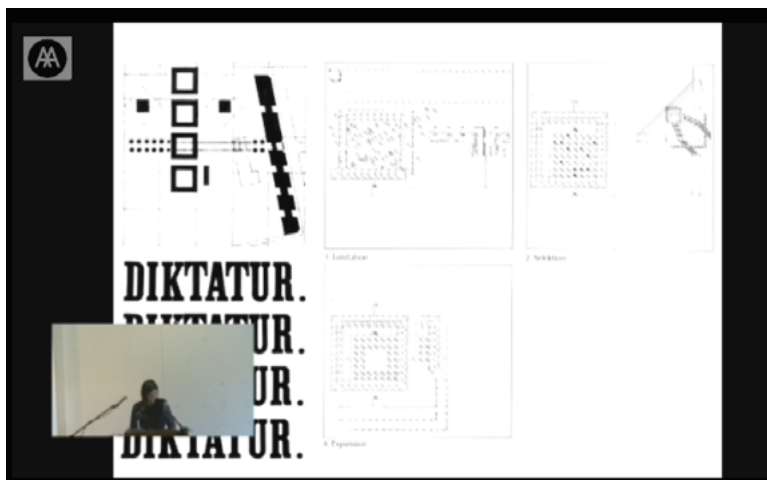
Ines Weizman presents the work of dissident architects. Screen capture from event video: http://www.aaschool.ac.uk/VIDEO/lecture.php?ID=2702.

bind of disarticulation and re-articulation—the honest assessment of late capitalism's stranglehold on cultural production and the struggle to enact new conditions within that behemoth. They also share Mouffe's interest in private spaces as constructions of power relations over the more idealist public space of appearance. Perhaps it was a general atmosphere of British politeness, or a shared respect for Mouffe's long-standing influence, or the lack of hotheaded disputes, but the collective conversation maintained a sense of cordial agreement—an ironic turn, given the repeated statements about how consensus can serve as a tool of hegemony. This emerging consensus was that architecture participates fully in the construction of late capitalist hegemony and can put forward incremental change only through the critique and reconstitution of that hegemonic order. Architectural agency, then, lies within liberal democratic nations, and within the types of private buildings that architects are still allowed to design—some housing and commercial offices, and a dwindling number of institutions.

Weizman's presentation offered a trigger for controversy and disagreement in the discussion—usefully revealing that which was inside and outside the emerging consensus. Mouffe declared bitingly that Weizman was not presenting agonism at all but rather agents operating outside of any established political structure. That, of course, was precisely the point, and Weizman's dissidents were the only figures presented who occupy an outside to an existing regime. While Mouffe complained the figure of the dissident is only critical and does not re-articulate new orders, this critical stance arrives from the fact that these dissidents were forcefully excluded and had no hope of achieving a voice through official means. Along with a pointed question from the audience about whether agonism can be enacted in volatile democracies like Turkey, the example of the dissidents revealed how Mouffe's ideas are relevant primarily for improving the machinations of established and generally Western representative democracies.

Besides the relatively narrow political bandwidth in which agonism operates, there is also the problem of *representation* in its architectural sense. Mouffe acknowledged many times the need to look more closely at representation, knowing no doubt the limitations of treating architecture as an entirely instrumental tool of hegemony. As Martin shows in *Utopia's Ghost*, architecture in all of its built, paper, and imagined incarnations can perpetuate neoliberalism's advance but can also open up productive slippages for ambiguous meanings and imagined alternatives to existing conditions. Focusing on drawings—opulent, colorful, ornate drawings at that—Weizman cracked open the Pandora's box of representational imagination as a tool of rebellion, which does not fit cleanly into the instrumentality pervading Mouffe's argument.

The overall conversation revealed the degree to which current discursive differences are still plotted on coordinates staked out by postwar critical discourse. In the years since the "critical turn" in architecture, as it has been called, architects have generally responded to Manfredo Tafuri's dare—to choose revolution or the boudoir—by carefully avoiding either extreme. For four decades, the architectural discipline has ricocheted between the camps of engagement and autonomy, between outside and inside, all the while remaining within its own terminologies and value

systems. The session left in its wake—for this author at least—a sense of frustrated entrapment. The consensus of the discussion was that architects must ruthlessly analyze structures of authority, thereby revealing their own powerlessness and limited agency within them while also holding out ideal and unrealizable utopias as motivations for possible change. Somewhere in between, the daily act of practice tinkers within the terrain allowed to it by global capital to enact some small manifestation of those utopian ideals. Is that really all that we have left as architects?

Certainly, alliances of global capital and political power shape architecture's processes of design, construction, and one could even say imagination. Perhaps the problem is not the desire for an outside, but rather, what kind of outside? Three of the speakers have, at different times, advocated a version of modernism as an outside to motivate change—Martin with his writings on the specter of modernist Utopia within postmodernism, Aureli with his discussion of Red Vienna as a model of agonistic enclaves, Whiting in her celebrations of ambitious modernist public projects in Chicago. The ghost of modernism represents the moment before the "critical" generation, when architectural innovation aligned with political will to produce spaces of appearance and action. But in the absence of the same political will, funding mechanisms, or even construction techniques, modernism can translate into the present simply as a style. As was witnessed at the Venice Biennale this summer, the fetish of modernism is cresting, and its danger is the default association of abstraction with political ambition. Although abstraction can be a tempting siren for architects, promising to bridge among critique, practice, and utopia, it can just as often be an aesthetic entirely complicit with global speculation.

The ricochet between critique and utopia ignores another outside that exists on every street of our cities—the difficult, messy, irreducible complexities of existing architecture. The material and urban challenges of postwar modernist architecture, in particular, do not sit easily within either public or architectural discourse. Instead, they stand as stumbling blocks for development and triggers for debate between architects and multiple constituencies. While architects run in circles to invent new forms that reconfigure existing hegemonies, there exist outside their offices built realities that manifest a range of "other" social and political ambitions. The fact that these spaces are out of sync with new development is exactly their strength—they enable us to experience the structures of other worldviews and force us to wrestle with our own cultural and political pasts.