

As a historian of the recent past I am perplexed by a particular aspect of contemporary architectural production: the most theoretically aware of contemporary architects have almost uniformly rejected the most important operative concept of architecture theory at the moment of its refoundation in the 1970s, namely the aspiration to an autonomy of disciplinary forms and techniques as a way of creating and measuring the distance between a critical practice and the presumed degraded status quo of mass culture. Over and against resistance and autonomy – or better, resistance through autonomy – recent design theories of various stripes have tended to take an affirmative position with regard to their cultural sponsors and seem to have accepted a certain determination by cultural forces outside architecture and over which architecture has no control.

While I could pull up any number of excerpts to exemplify these opposing positions, less than twenty years apart, of a resistance through disciplinary autonomy versus the affirmation of architecture's lack of distinction, the following two are among the most concise. The first is from Massimo Scolari, speaking for the architecture of the Fifteenth Triennale in Milan in 1973, the so-called *Tendenza*. He writes, "The new architecture's 'renunciation' is actually a full historical awareness ..."

For the *Tendenza*, architecture is a cognitive process that in and of itself, in the acknowledgement of its own autonomy, is today necessitating a refounding of the discipline; that refuses interdisciplinary solutions to its own crisis; that does not pursue and immerse itself in political, economic, social, and technological events ... but rather desires to understand them so as to be able to intervene in them with lucidity.¹

The second is from Alejandro Zaera Polo, speaking of Frank Gehry's ability not to fall into "the merely disciplinary discussions that have monopolized cultivated architectural debate since the mid-1970s."

"The return to a more direct architecture, closer to the techniques of advertising than to academic rhetoric, has been integrated by Gehry in a work that is no less experimental for its *transparency*, [which is to say] its harmony with the desires and possibilities of a determined socioeconomic sector: the California of the Reagan Era ... The temporality of architecture as an object of consumption, a commodity whose [capacity for representation ("representativity")] is closer to publicity than to monumentality, is one of the consequences of this inheritance [of surrealist thought]."²

I am not able yet to fully account for this new attitude in architecture, but I do want to ponder it briefly here. As I will be trying here to manage some still emergent indices of a sensibility whose full form we cannot yet see, I propose to proceed historically through two earlier paradigms before I return to this recent change of mind.

While the ideology of autonomy is properly part of the legacy of high modernism, the concept still had enormous resonance in the formation of architecture theory after 1968 (especially in the United States and Italy), at a time when architecture as traditionally practiced saw itself threatened on two fronts: from inside by technological optimization and utilitarianism, and from outside by the demands placed on it as a service industry, as well as by the positivist inquiries of the behavioral sciences, sociology, and operations research. These latter inquiries sought to quantify architecture's characteristics, effectively restricting, if not denying altogether, its role as a culturally emergent endeavor with an epistemic status quite its own.

Architecture theory drew on various models in an effort to think architecture back into its own as a discipline, a practice, and a mode of knowledge with a specific tradition and history, in short, to think architecture's autonomy, to preserve the specificity and irreducibility of the architectural experience and, through that, to offer a way of managing very real existential problems without offering anything like the satisfaction of consumption. Above all, the discourse of autonomy developed a theory of typology, which allowed the resolution of the contradictory desires for autonomy, on the one hand, and an architectural representation of the city, on the other.

There are two points I want to underscore here, which will become important later. First, the typology thesis entails a Lukacsian realist discourse that seeks an architecture whose very "authenticity" paradoxically depends on its reiterability, whose success at evoking and recollecting solid, concrete memories depends on its repetition of an already iterable code, lest it degenerate into a language so private that it is bereft of any public resonance.³

What is more, the interactive subject of a type is just the city itself, understood as a whole, whose nature is induced from its architectural elements (the "ontology of the city"). The city is responsible for the isolation and fragmentation of architecture down into constitutive parts (hence the importance of Piranesi) but also for simultaneously extending its logic uniformly over patch of the cultural fabric so that in each isolated type the entire genetic code of the city can be found.

Rossi's Modena cemetery, for example, seizes on this idea and derives its poignancy from the constructed interaction of tomb, house, city, and cemetery. Within each of these primary types are insinuated-obliquely, anamorphically-all the others, producing a kind of overprinting of types and a conceptual pass through different registers of analogous moments.

Architecture in its very autonomy thereby enables the conception of a world that may actually exist but is nevertheless verifiable.

At a different level of the typology thesis appears the key concept from Althusser of the "semi-autonomy" of "levels" or „instances within an ideological field – the economic, political, juridical, cultural, aesthetic levels, and so on each "overdetermined" and held together by the "structural totality" of a social formation. (This, I think, helps explain Scolari's otherwise contradictory assertion of autonomy and lucid intervention.) Here we have a non-causal model of the social structure understood as a set of insides and outsides that are reciprocally constituted and related by way of their ultimate structural *difference* and distance from one another rather than their ultimate identity.

While this model of autonomy and typology seems powerful and still correct in a certain sense, what was missed by the arguments of the *Tendenza* is that the very conditions on which its "ontology" depends – namely the traditional European city – had, by the time of this theorization, already disappeared as a contemporaneous object of experience. For by the mid-1960s it was no longer the city in the sense of the traditional European city that was primarily operative but rather the suburbs, edge city, exurbia, and the zone as it has seemed almost intractable theoretically.

Or perhaps it wasn't missed. While Rossi's typological obsessions seem to be a way of constantly confirming the determinate presence of the traditional European city, refracting its historical logic of form through a neo-Enlightenment lens in contingent, contradictory, and quasisurreal ways, their peculiar mnemonic function also makes it possible to see a new beauty in precisely what is vanishing. The originality of Rossi's work may well be its capacity to convey, with unblinking disenchantment, that the traditional European city – which in some sense means architecture itself – is forever lost. What is more, this follows, I believe, from the Lukacsian moment in his thesis, for the one form of experience that concretely represents the force of reification is crisis – when, in Rossi's case, the mnemonic function fails, the memory banks become so compartmentalized and arid that will hold nothing other than the most flattened out of material. Thus does Rossi's architecture historicize itself to a certain extent, place itself and reflect on itself before the historian or critic ever arrives; thus, too, the palpable sense in his work of a historically determined melancholy. As Tafuri insisted, in a direct response to what Scolari called a refounding of the discipline, "The thread of Ariadne with which Rossi weaves his typological research does no lead to the 'reestablishment of the discipline,' but rather to its dissolution (dans la Boudoir, p. 155).

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Looking now for the terms on which the traditional city was disappearing and a now posturbanism was emerging, one remembers Thomas Pynchon's 1966 novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, when Oedipa Maas looks out from her Chevy Impala across California's private property developments and sees them, importantly, as a printed circuit that is communicating to her – not directly but in textural patterns or, as Pynchon says, "a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her ... [It was] a revelation [trembling] just past the threshold of her understanding." What is striking here is not only that this veil of hieroglyphs is the post-urban form itself, but also that the opposing terms of this new global network are (first) the development of electronic technology – represented here by the printed circuit – and (second) communication – the intent – which must be understood as in contradiction with the new technology that tends to be illegible, but which together are resolved by the third term we now know as media.

We need not rehearse the ways in which media changed the very nature of the experience of urban public space except to recall that now visual reception challenged the tactility of objects and the perception of architectural surfaces began to overtake the experience of urban space in the traditional sense. Meanwhile, the extensive development of buildings on the outskirts of the city and the new distribution of services to suburban commercial zones made the control of the quality of urban space through traditional compositional, tectonic, and typological means more and more difficult. Image consumption began to replace object production and the sheer heterogeneity of images exploded any single, stable, typology of the city. Consequently a split was felt to open up between the world of building in the European tradition of *Bauen* or *Baukunst* and the everyday world of the American popular environment; and this would later with Venturi and others become a fundamental split in architectural theory.

What is further suggested here and completely understood by Venturi is that the semiotic surface of architecture, understood as a displacement of the older type form, is entirely adequate to, entirely conforms to our third term of media. Henceforth the social system will be inconceivable without a concept of media and its two constituents, electronic, consumer technology and heterogeneous communication – as media will, right up to our own time, becomes the spontaneous solution to architecture's representational problem.

And so it is a mutation of this second reception paradigm and the architectural production adequate to it that must concern us now. The examples I could draw from are many, but I have in the front of my mind recent theoretical and architectural projects of Greg Lynn and others. In general, I have in mind the attempts to shift our thinking about architectural forms and functions from either the model of disciplinary autonomy and typology or the communication and heterogeneity of the semiotic surface to one that affirms the smooth fusion of relations among now digitally synthesized images of diverse origins. For its mediatory term this new architecture employs the metaphor not of a semiotic surface but of computer software itself, which coordinates multiple entities in a smooth, frictionless flow and, further, affirms a unity of techniques from architecture, physics, engineering, computation, biology, and more. One might characterize this shift as one from the autonomy of the object, through the heterogeneity of collage, both of which dramatize disjunction, to the production of new whole through the liquification of boundaries and the radical mixing of not only forms but also of material and concepts from different disciplines. This is architecture's full entry into the new communications and entertainment technologies and, with that, a breakdown of the once fiercely defended autonomy and uniqueness of the architectural experience. Feeling increasing pressure from other forms of contemporary image culture that would displace architecture's collective communicative-symbolic function, it seems that architecture has reacted by trying to become just those things – a multimedia fusion of graphic devices collected on an animated, alloyed surface of texture and pattern that can be scanned for information, that seems to send references, at one scale, to the molecular, biological informational system of DNA and, at another scale, to the global urbanization of the planet, and to join those two poles with an image, a look, that I have previously referred to as a kind of architectural "smoothness."

But the slackening of specificity seems also to have produced an architecture whose function and visage can drift and expand in culture in unprecedented ways, spreading laterally in a stretched-out mixed-media experience. The production of this architecture explicitly refuses any craven professionalism and its techniques are the generic ones of design as can be applied to automobiles and iMacs as much as buildings. The perception of this architecture is woven into the same fabric as the latest high-tech gadgets, cell phones, video games and televisual leisure. Architecture is now just part of the smooth media mix and yet, in all of this, the architecture strives to play a crucial cultural role.

The architectural surface is still important in this third category and that is evidence that it builds on

the accumulated techniques and effects of the second. But notice, for one thing, that this surface no longer corresponds to a particular social public or locale – the street, the strip, Las Vegas, Levittown – with the same immediacy as, say, Venturil's populism (though, I have suggested elsewhere, it reaches out to or creates its own public in the post-baby-boomers generation). This seeming lack of an audience is, perhaps, partly what gives them their faint air, of unreality, or at least a free-floating absence of a stable referent even on the order of the heterogeneous mass of raw materials of a Venturi. But it is nevertheless helpful to keep for a moment the architectural trope of the surface as a temporary stabilizing guide for a brief exploration of this aesthetic of smoothing.

This surface, though, is modulated through procedures that trace, as if automatically, certain external sociological or technological facts which then remain legible in the final form of the project. These traces appear in our reading of the architecture as doing the double duty of articulating the surface, implying differentiated possibilities for occupation, and encoding phenomena outside the object that cannot, in their very nature, be represented directly. They effectively expand the space of the project to include a range of institutional, legal, technical, and cultural arrangements that precede, determine, and exist beyond the architectural object. A new kind of reception is suggested here in which the sensory, the aesthetic, is somehow mingled with the theoretical. And so, the surface of this architecture asks to be read not in semiotic terms but rather as registration of the discursive practices that shape the object and make possible what can become visible within it, and simultaneously, as a diagram of potentials for occupation, a *dispositif* or distribution apparatus for other practices that it, in turn, enables.

As for the discourse of type, long assumed by most contemporary commentators to be unworthy of attention, Lynn, for one, is explicit about the fact that his reiterative, interconnective blobs are themselves deviations out of typology's formal logic. Geometric types, he says, now become a "plane of consistency on which differential transformations and deformations occur. Type itself is never fully present in a fixed state in an entire species [of form]. Thus a more fluid and dynamic system of measure can be employed to describe ever-changing spatial bodies through their manifestations at single moments." But more important, though one would not think to associate the realist, narrative ambitions of the *Tendenza* with this new architecture, in the attempt to give form to the effective elements of a new globalized media technology, or better, to make the system of media the subject and the problem of the work of design, a historically aware totalizing impulse is now once again evident in much of contemporary design practice.

Posturbanism itself – edge cities, suburbs, the “thick two-dimensions” of Asian cities, and others, the whole docket of the emergent posturban life that has heretofore seemed unmappable and unmanageable – is the most obvious manifestation and example of the sort of distribution apparatus that this architecture seeks to be: an enormous deterritorialized plane, its boundaries contingent on a particular geography and topography (stopped by a river or mountain range or an arbitrarily legislated property line), reterritorialized by any of various patterns (grids, patchworks, mosaics, etc.), some of which are inscribed on the ground, many of which may lie beneath the thin, occupiable surface, insensible yet controlling infrastructural points and lines of force whose positions and relations have been determined by a notational language with translation rules conventionally understood by the multiple agents responsible for putting them in place. As much as by the partitioning off of areas, the type and intensity of activity on the surface is regulated by a kind of rheostatic apparatus below that also senses changes on the surface it now charges (we need more cable here, another tunnel there). The bodies on the surface are so many metal filings on a plate, forming patterns (flocks, swarms, neighborhoods), which are also charged with group alliances and specific cognitive and practical ways of negotiating the templates that enable possible performative events. By reaching to “formalize the entire world” (Lynn), this architecture traces a visual field determined by technologies and techniques of production wholly present, yet capable of producing the concept of alternatives. But if a globalized posturbanism and information technology have here replaced both the traditional city and the suburbs, along with their earlier technologies; and if the architectural representation or term of internal mediation seems to have been given by the media itself, our problem is to determine what is the *external* term of mediation that might allow us to complete the theorization of this paradigm in relation to the previous two. What is the structural nexus in our viewing and aesthetic decoding apparatus that would allow us to represent the unrepresentable real of posturbanism and information technology?

One formal or structural interpretant that immediately suggests itself is ecology, or more particularly, a matrix or field condition capable of interconnecting elements into a single tissue while respecting the identity of each (recall Althusser). As Kwinter asserts, “A field describes a space of propagation, of effects. It contains no matter or material points, rather functions, vectors, and speeds. It describes local relations of difference within fields of celerity, transmission or of careering points, in a word, what Minkowski called the *world*.” (Note again the totalization.)

As for the particular mode of reception adequate for this formal ecology or field condition, I am not

the first to suggest that such an analogon is going to be something like what video theorists call “total flow”: the constant emission of constantly changing bits of information that we move in and out of in a kind of ultimate suture between space and time. Total flow has roots in the pop culture and media experience of the second paradigm, of course, but its timespace is volatilized far beyond anything that the term heterogeneity describes. In fact, the emissions from the video screen and the computer terminal within which it will eventually merge homogenize experience into a kind of all pervasive liquid force and neutralize psychic energy.

But one advantage of the notion of total flow is that it has as its distant relative nothing less than distraction itself, which, of course, Walter Benjamin saw as the architectural mode of perception *par excellence*. And surely the random succession of video images that one attends to in varying degrees, pulling in and out of our frame of conscious attention, is very like the experience of most any building or space in the contemporary city. And, too, total flow helps to model the way in which this new architectural paradigm is able to debit a wide range of sources for its cultural credit. By weakening disciplinary autonomy, by dedifferentiating certain design procedures and images, by dissolving the very distinction between the architectural representation and the world of image-spectacles, this architecture paradoxically (or dialectically) produces a link between the spatial experiences it enables and the abstract global system of late capitalism, but more: the link is made in terms of social space and the images constructed to locate subject positions in that space.

I would like to insist upon this last point and here I borrow a diagram from Jameson, p. 416–417.

Jameson suggests that this sort of triangulation is historically specific and whose terms are themselves “unconscious structures and so many afterimages and secondary effects of some properly postmodern cognitive mapping, whose indispensable media term now passes itself off as this or that philosophical reflection on language, communication, and the media, rather than the manipulation of its figure.”

The development of this work I have charted should thus be seen according to a double movement of internal transformations out of typology and the semiotic surface and a shifting and transitory mapping of those external determinations of collective life under capitalism. The vestiges of the raw material of media remain visible within these projects, of course. At the same time, however, the transmutation of the datascape of capital can be understood as an anticipatory representation of a future yet to arrive.

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Analogon, or term of external mediation	Architectural representation, or term of internal mediation	Ontology, or the unrepresentable real
Autonomy Melancholy	Typology	Disappearing traditional European city
Communication Heterogeneity Irony	Semiotic surface (Media culture as representational problem)	Emerging suburban, consumer city and electronic technologies (economy of means)
Field effects, ecology, datascapes De-differentiation and lateral affiliation Totalization Total flow	Faceted or liquid surface understood as <i>dispositif</i> (Media production and techniques as representational solution)	Post-urbanism Information technologies (diversity and flexibility)

Notes:

- 1) Massimo Scolari, *The New Architecture and the Avant-Garde*, in: K. Michael Hays (ed.), *Architecture Theory since 1968*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1998), p. 131.
- 2) Alejandro Zaera Polo, *Frank O. Gehry, Still Life*, *El Groquis*, v. 9, n. 45 (November 1990), p. 8, 12.
- 3) This is exemplified by Giorgio Grassi's reference to Lukács's realism of visually evoked fitness: "The 'realism' of a pillar consists...in the relation which from the moment of the pillar's appearance is established with that form in time."