The Anxiety of Anonymity: Bureaucracy and Genius in Late Modern Architecture Industry

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Henry-Russell Hitchcock predicted that the dominant criteria for evaluating postwar modernism would be organized not on the basis of style but according to economies of production. In "The Architecture of Bureaucracy and the Architecture of Genius," published in the Architectural Review in 1947, Hitchcock outlined new categories of practice in the context of an emerging

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postwar industrial society, at once productive and discursive, that would require terms of description and analysis different from those that had applied to the work of the prewar avant-garde.[1] Previous debates over the language in which to build had been structured around the avant-garde terms of advance or regression. On the other side of World War II, both the exigencies of wartime construction and the immediate needs of the postwar building boom had produced what Hitchcock termed a "clarification of the architectural picture," in which "it came about that there was at last only one contemporary way of building": like the Allies, modernism had definitively won its own battle at midcentury. Hitchcock, clearly satisfied with this outcome, ventured that in the wake of this victory, the older revolutionary terms of debate would be replaced by newer questions. "It is not too optimistic," he declared, "to say that the particular situation which justified a primary critical approach to new buildings in terms of their degree of modernity came to an end with the present decade."

The new social, political, and economic context of the postwar period, then, would place new demands on the architectural profession, to be resolved within the dominant language of modernism. While industrial development and larger, more complex design problems would require new methods of practice for the postwar architect, they would also require different tools on the part of the architectural critic, faced with entirely new questions in evaluating the built results of these practices. Declaring that with the increasing

scale and scope of the new design tasks "the major problem of architecture in the middle of the twentieth century is presumably going to be a problem not of up-to-dateness but of quality," Hitchcock predicted that a new type of professional entity would evolve, equipped with the competence required to provide the required quality of execution: the bureaucratic design office. "Bureaucratic architecture," he wrote, would include "all building that is the product of large-scale architectural organizations, from which personal expression is absent."

In contrast to the emphasis on speed and competence required for the large-scale projects to which this type of bureaucratic architecture would ideally be suited—the article identified town planning, hospitals, and schools as examples—Hitchcock counterposed "an entirely different world" of design practice for those monumental or special cultural commissions requiring artistic or creative synthesis, "the world of the architecture of genius." The genius would be the antibureaucrat, "the sort of architect who functions as a creative individual rather than as an anonymous member of a team"; his method would be "a particular psychological approach and way of working at architecture which may or may not produce masterpieces."

These two types of practice and their resulting languages of expression— the competent "prose" of the bureaucrat and the imaginative "poetry" of the genius—would each have their domain of professional application, not to be confused. So, too, their products would require separate modes of evaluation on the part of the critic. "Conceptually the two types of work are distinct and should not be subjected to the same type of analysis and criticism," Hitchcock warned. Henceforth, it would no longer be possible to judge bureaucratic production on the same artistic criteria that had been applied to the prewar authors of avant-garde modernism, whether the inter-pretive framework of singular authorial intention or the expressive attri-butes of imagination, creativity, synthesis, etc.; for "only complex individual structures of generalized symbolic meaning"—that is, those produced by the genius—"actually fail architecturally when there has been no individual imaginative formulation." Hitchcock's distinction between the two modes of practice constituted a first call, at the outset of the Cold War, for new meth-ods of history and criticism capable of describing the new systems of pro-duction that would mark the decades to come.

A year prior to Hitchcock's text, the sociologist Peter Drucker identified the large corporation as the representative American social institution, a form that would come to constitute the dominant model not just for business but for the majority of postwar organizations.[2] In contrast to both the atelier model and prewar methods of Taylorist production embodied by firms such as Ford (and Albert Kahn), Drucker argued that the enlightened manage-rial principles that would typify the postwar economic boom would emulate the flexible, distributed model of General Motors, based on a management structure of independent automobile divisions combined with centralized, coordinated decision making and control. The organizational principles of decentralization, collaboration in teams, and a mix of generalists and

specialists at different levels within the hierarchy were, for Drucker, the characteristics that would mark the progressive application of corporate models across both business and institutional domains in the postwar context.

True to these predictions, a number of design firms emerged after the end of World War II ready to take up the potentials of just such large-scale, distributed models of practice for the economies of architectural production. Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM), founded in 1936, had emerged from the war with a large staff and a new arsenal of integrated production methods, as the wartime planning of Oak Ridge, Tennessee (the top-secret town of 75,000 responsible for producing uranium for the atomic bomb), had exposed the firm to rapid production and collaboration in teams with engineers and technical consultants. Caudill, Rowlett, Scott (CRS), founded in 1945 in College Station, Texas, would pioneer (simultaneously with SOM) new disciplinary tools such as "programming" and fast-track project management that enabled the flexible production of increasingly large, complex projects in shorter time frames by what founder William Caudill described as "great interdisciplinary teams."[3] Like SOM, the principals' interest in team production was stimulated by their exposure to the collaborative procedures and flexible design methods required in the reuse of U.S. military bases following the war and developed through the firm's involvement with the rapid design of flexible suburban school programs in the Midwest.[4]

The postwar office that best represented the ethos of distributed team production was the Architects Collaborative (TAC), established in 1945 by seven recent graduates of Yale, Smith, and the Harvard Graduate School of Design, together with Walter Gropius, a major voice among the prewar avant-garde for applying collaborative and team production methods to architectural practice. TAC's methodology reflected the collaborative organizational characteristics advocated by Gropius as well as the progressive managerial techniques described by sociologists such as Drucker; its partners' ideological commitment to anonymity was reflected in the firm's name. Like the divisions of General Motors, each principal was responsible for his (or her) own projects, while a weekly partners meeting allowed project decisions to be vetted by all eight principals as equals, with final decisions made by the principal in charge. Teams were composed of generalists, rather than collections of specialist consultants each capable of addressing only specific portions of a project; like the partners meetings, this structure enabled feedback between different members of each team working on the same problems. Coupled with a steady increase in size (with 142 employees by 1964), this structure enabled TAC to meet the criteria of competence, efficiency, and quality that Hitchcock had posed as the imperatives of this new order of "large-scale architectural organizations."[5]

The foundation of TAC marked a prominent use of the new language of corporate ideology by an office that would rise quickly within the pedagogical and discursive context of American architectural practice in the 1950s. The identification of the office as a collaborative rather than through the names of its partners (as at SOM and CRS) alluded directly to the ideology of anonymous, team-based production that lay at the heart of the corporate

model. Gropius, the chosen voice of TAC's organizational model (though significantly, as we will see, not by any means the primary author of the firm's architectural output), had also written about the positive impact that collaborative models of management could have on architectural practices in the postwar. In 1952, on the verge of his retirement from Harvard to focus on the work of the firm, Gropius reiterated the urgent need for "a closely co-operating team together with the engineer, the scientist and the builder," in which "design construction and economy may again become an entity—a fusion of art, science and business."[6] Only such an integrated, team-based management structure would allow the profession to combat its increasing divorce from building production, a development that threatened to reduce the scope of the architect's services and his or her role within the new building tasks that demanded comprehensive solutions. This pragmatic argument was coupled with an ideological one: Gropius insisted that this model of collaboration across disciplines would allow the architect to recover the ideal of integration represented by the preindustrial figure of the master builder in the context of postwar industrial society.

These issues of production would also directly concern questions of authorship and the self-image of the producer, issues with which Gropius was intimately familiar through his long engagement with the teaching of architecture students. He warned that the new team-based production methods required by the needs of industrial society would also entail an inevitable confrontation with inherited expectations about the autonomy and importance of the architect, predicting that

> the younger generation of architects … [is] beginning to lose confidence in the trusteeship character of our professional setup and in its logical result: the self-appointed prima donna architect. Architects in the future will refuse to be restrained from a natural urge to take actual part in a team effort with the industry to produce buildings and their parts. The emphasis, I believe, will be more and more on the team.[7]

Significantly, Gropius understood that the team approach would require new attitudes toward individual self-consciousness on the part of architects accustomed to thinking in terms of singular authorship. Students of architecture would have "to learn to collaborate without losing their identity," an approach he had worked to promote through the institution of collaborative workshops at both the Bauhaus and, later, Harvard. The historical task of the next generation of architects, inheritors of the legacy of modernism, would be to overcome "the ideology of the past century" that "has taught us to see in the individual genius the only embodiment of true and pure art."[8]

In the context of all these developments, how was Hitchcock's call for a new mode of criticism commensurate with these changes in production taken up in the decades that followed? In what follows, I will focus on TAC as a firm that was centrally involved in these developments in bureaucratic practice, to examine whether historians and critics were, in fact, able to develop the sort of tools called for by Hitchcock in describing such practices. Fast-forwarding to the state of architectural discourse at the close of

late modernist practice in the 1970s, I will focus on the major critical texts on late modernism written in that decade, a period that marked the peak of TAC's professional successes in the United States and abroad. In looking at how these authors grappled on the level of discourse with the realities of corporate production by offices such as TAC, we can gain a first lens into the broader history of how these offices, and the architects that comprised them, negotiated the new terrain of bureaucratized postwar production at the level of practice.

Measured in professional and financial terms, the 1970s were, in many ways, the peak of TAC's success. In 1973, TAC was the largest architecture-only firm in the Unites States. From its founding eight principals in 1945, the office had grown to 272 employees, with annual billings in the range of $5 to $7.5 million.[9] In that year the firm completed or had under way a number of major representative projects in the United States and abroad, including the design for the Johns-Manville World Headquarters in Colorado, the result of an architectural competition in which TAC was selected over the offices of I. M. Pei, Josep Lluís Sert, William Pereira, and Caudill, Rowlett, Scott, and a project that Paul Goldberger would later describe (upon the completion of the building in 1978) as "perhaps the ultimate corporate environment in the nation."[10] The headquarters of the American Institute of Architects, designed by TAC, opened in Washington, D.C., that year as the representative space of the architectural profession in the United States. In addition to its prominent national commissions, the firm was building projects all over the world, with large urban projects in countries including Yugoslavia, Greece, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Kuwait. By any measure, TAC in the 1970s was an office whose achievements might be expected to figure prominently in any discussion of the profession's most important design practices.

Yet TAC's reflection in the professional literature in the 1970s reveals a profound inability of contemporary architectural writers and critics to acknowledge the firm's achievements—even the basic fact of its existence—in spite of these conspicuous successes. The beginning of the 1970s saw the publication of Charles Jencks's *Modern Movements in Architecture*, a revisionist account of the ideas of the prewar avant-gardes and their legacy for late modernist and, as Jencks would christen it a few years later, postmodern practice. While an entire section of the book is devoted to Walter Gropius, his "collapse into formalism," and the legacy of his "mixed intentions" after World War II, TAC is discussed nowhere in the text.[11] The very existence of TAC is indicated only in the captions for three images (out of 236 in the book) of projects listed as "Walter Gropius with TAC." The omission repeats itself in the appendix, where a half page of references are given for Gropius—subsuming these projects again with the parenthetical "(with TAC)"—while omitting any listing for TAC itself.

Jencks's account is a particularly egregious example of the sort of elision of TAC that exists throughout the literature in the 1970s. In this history, TAC matters only as the office name appended to Walter Gropius's American production and effectively ceases to exist as a narrative subject after

Gropius's death in 1969. The entirety of the firm and its work is casually distorted to fit the master narrative of an architect's fall from the idealisms of the avant-garde under the compromising exigencies of postwar practice; the work of hundreds of architects is reduced to the authorship of one man. The degree to which TAC's presence is suppressed through the entire apparatus of the book (sustained across the main text, captions, footnotes, and appendix of illustrations), combined with the special attention to Gropius and his work after World War II, appears—if not pathological—at least symptomatic of the deep ambivalence felt by contemporary critics toward the assessment of such bureaucratic firms and their production.

If Jencks provides the most blatant case of obliviousness to (or repression of) the reality of bureaucratic practice in the 1970s, we might look to those critics who were expressly concerned with relating the ideological content of postwar architectural practices back to their means of production. In the second volume of their *Modern Architecture* (1976), Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co begin to reiterate the new conditions of practice in the terms laid out by Hitchcock in 1947. In the postwar period, they write:

> A true and proper "architecture of bureaucracy" settled in everywhere, in Europe and America as well as in Asia. But this was no deliberate emphasis on elementals attended by a tragic self-awareness .... The field came to be dominated not by individual architects intent on communicating their opinions of the world but by large studios in which the tasks were parceled out with virtual assembly-line standards ... equipped to work at an intense speed of production and to fulfill demands for high technological levels in buildings as anonymous as the architectural concerns that build them.[12]

While acknowledging these systems of production, Tafuri and Dal Co prove unwilling to take up the new terms of criticism called for by Hitchcock in relation to its products. This recognition is followed not by a deeper investigation of such systems and what they might mean for architectural practice (or for the critical evaluation of such work) but by declaring the work of such offices to be all but worthless for an account of postwar practice. Instead, Tafuri and Dal Co settle for the formal reading of architectural projects in terms of their ideological content or (what is for them much the same thing) as more or less successful reflections of their authors' intentions. Singular authorship remains the necessary requirement for an architectural work to be judged worthy of evaluation—a prejudice that marks Tafuri and Dal Co's approach as conventional in methodological terms, even if critical and Marxist in approach.

In maintaining such a critical refusal, any description of an office such as TAC could be only a harsh one. Similar to Jencks and others, Tafuri and Dal Co begin their account of architectural production after the 1950s with the need to take stock of the figures of the prewar avant-garde, those "traditional 'masters' of the modern movement" whose work after World War II had now "arrived at a final accounting." A central figure of this survey is Gropius, "who chose ... to realize in America his constant ideal of teamwork designing

as evidence of the continuity between the specialist group and society as a whole." Thus credited alone with these interests, Tafuri and Dal Co claim that "in 1946 [sic] he created The Architects Collaborative (TAC), gathering around himself some of his former students and, as was his wont, reserving to himself the role of methodologist within the group."[13] Symptomatically, the story of agency is told backward, through the singular intentions of Gropius and his presumed influence on "his" students. In fact, it was the younger practitioners who approached Gropius with the proposal to start an office, possibly after considering other names—George Howe, Louis Kahn, and Edward Durrell Stone among them—in the recognition that a senior practitioner with an established name would be useful to the young firm.

The consequences of such commitment to teamwork—and the grounds for the critical dismissal of TAC's subsequent work as an object of inquiry—would soon become clear. Tafuri and Dal Co render their final judgment of the firm as follows:

> by its nature, and subject as it was to the laws of the American market, TAC very soon became a many-branched, impersonal concern equipped to deal with the major professional ventures and open to any sort of request from public or private clients …. Gropius proved willing to legitimize with his signature ostentatious urban paradoxes like the Pan American Building of 1958 in New York …. More and more the approach of TAC tended towards a formalism whose low point as regards quality was reached in the John F. Kennedy Building of 1961-66 in Boston.[14]

"To legitimize with his signature"—the language of authorship is here made explicit, as is the narrative (already prefigured by Jencks) of the avant-garde master subsumed into the corrupting formalisms of bureaucratic practice. Unwittingly capturing their own position in relation to such narratives, Tafuri and Dal Co summarize the historical position of Gropius in the 1970s in the most condemnatory terms: "the refusal of Gropius to remain a 'master' and his disappearance into the reality of American professional life were paid for with a harsh price that necessarily affects any discussion of his career."[15]

The anxieties over how to envision the work of TAC and other "anonymous" bureaucratic practices, evident in these texts, mark a particular form of historical closure. In spite of Henry-Russell Hitchcock's call in 1947 for new modes of criticism adequate to the bureaucratic office, by the close of the 1970s, it was still not possible to critically or historically situate the reality of such practices without a reliance on the conventional tropes of authorship, influence, and intentionality. In light of this closure, we might ask, What is it that has prevented architectural historians even today from fully accounting for, or even being able to fully "see" and thus begin to historicize, the work of corporate offices? A look at the elisions of this work from architectural history leads to troubling questions about the adequacy of the traditional methodological apparatus of the architectural historian in situating or properly evaluating this kind of production.

A lasting residue of such historiographical elisions is that it has been largely impossible to incorporate the histories of large-scale, distributed

bureaucratic offices such as TAC into current histories of postwar architectural practice. The standard methodological apparatus of the architectural historian, with its reliance on the legibility of authorial intentions as discerned through a formal reading of built or published works, has been largely incompatible with practices that are organized around principles of collaboration, anonymity, team decision making, and large, distributed scales of management and production—precisely the goals upon which TAC was founded in 1945—despite the fact that such practices were ubiquitous by the 1970s and indeed constitute much of the standard business models by which architecture is practiced today. ◆

ENDNOTES

1. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, "The Architecture of Bureaucracy and the Architecture of Genius," *Architectural Review,* No. 101 (January 1947), pp. 3-6.

2. Peter Drucker, *Concept of the Corporation* (New York: John Day Company, 1946).

3. William Caudill, *Architecture by Team* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971). See also William Peña with William Caudill and John Focke, *Problem Seeking: An Architectural Programming Primer* (Boston: Cahners Books International, 1977).

4. Jonathan King and Peter Langdon, eds., *The CRS Team and the Business of Architecture* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002). On the origins of programming in relation to school design, I am indebted to Hashim Sarkis for providing manuscript chapters from his forthcoming book, *A Second Functionalism*.

5. Walter Gropius and Sarah Harkness, eds., *The Architects Collaborative 1945-1965* (Teufen: Arthur Niggli Ltd., 1966). In this volume, see, in particular, statements by TAC's founding partners on collaborative production, including Gropius, "TAC's Teamwork," Harkness, "Collaboration," and Louis A. McMillen, "The Idea of Anonymity."

6. "The Architect within Our Industrial Society," in Gropius, *Scope of Total Architecture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), pp. 76-90.

7. Ibid., p. 84. Italics original.

8. Ibid.

9. Ralph Biggadike, "Architects Collaborative, Inc.," Harvard Business School, Case 575-016 (1974).

10. Paul Goldberger, "Fleeing Cities: A Company Finds Suburbs Encroaching," *New York Times,* April 27, 1978. Reprinted as "The Johns Manville Headquarters" in Goldberger, *On the Rise: Architecture and Design in a Postmodern Age* (New York: Times Books, 1983), pp. 97-99.

11. "Gropius, Wright, and the Collapse into Formalism," in Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (London: Penguin Books, 1973). See the introduction to the second edition, published in 1983, in which Jencks concludes that "in 1984, fateful year, when our architectural future is being stamped by ever larger bureaucratic firms, when our biggest offices such as those led by Walter Gropius perpetrate a form of historicist kitsch in the Middle East … it is time to reassess our recent past and Western culture together: criticize the unthinking Modernism and historicism which are so commercially successful." Gropius had died in 1969.

12. Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture/2* (Milan: Electa, 1976), p. 339.

13. Ibid., p. 307.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.