

The Absurd Alibi

An alibi is an excuse, or defense to avoid blame in a crime. Architecture, ultimately has very little control over how it is received by the world out there. The vacuum-like premise of autonomy is incompatible with that world.

Reflecting on the possibility autonomous and contingent objects in architecture, it soon becomes apparent that either scenario in this either/or battle is something akin to a sentimentalized fantasy. First, by focusing on objects rather than architectural space, fields, or images for example, such a conception loses sight of the relational and processural qualities of architecture. Second, and perhaps obviously, architecture necessarily exists as process located between these constructed poles or between the discipline's inside and its outside. Vitruvius recognized this complex transaction when he wrote about the relationship between theory and practice centuries ago. Similarly, Stan Allen writes of architecture as a material practice—"working in and among world of thing—an instrumental practice capable of transforming reality."

These points aside, I've also chosen to take the debate bait, if you will, and position myself strongly on one side of what has been indicated in several of the discussions at this conference—is actually a dialectical framework. Of course it's not a dichotomous choice between two rigid options, but a complex feedback between these poles. This paper, however, is not a settling of a cheery middle ground, or a colonization of a negotiated terrain, but sticks to the event's Fox News-like distinctions of liberal and conservative, autonomous and contingent, critical and post-critical, good and evil. It is a commentary on a contemporary condition. While not explicitly pro-contingency, my position in this paper is decidedly anti-autonomy. It questions the possibility that such a condition could exist, but moreover what is gained by marshalling autonomy for architectural ends. Perhaps ironically, and considering the historical development of the term, this is actually a "critical" position.

A reader of my initial paper commented that my critique of autonomy was "acidic", which I fully agreed with. But the purpose of this caustic analysis is not to merely knock other, perhaps well-intentioned, projects down, but to see them anew. It also is not meant to be a personal attack, but a reflection on a generalized condition. The project of autonomy, I find, has a curious way of being interpreted as a personal project and hence discussions of it—laudatory or critical—get personalized. This paper doesn't offer a detailed case study to work through the problems set before us, but offers a provisional diagnosis of our

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contemporary moment. It is my sense that pouring acid, like the act of cutting or stereotomically subtracting can be a productive endeavor. It can de-form old forms and generate new ones, dis-figure figures, and melt objects. It can corrode material, transform surfaces, and produce beautiful patterns. Acid exposes the fictitious stability of autonomy to the destabilizing effects of contingency.

Once the panelists for this discussion had been convened, we were asked to ponder the following motion: With a return to the well of figural form, have any of the inconsistencies or limitations of past autonomous form making informed the seemingly infinite variability of today's shapes and figures? Are we still on the same road or is it really different this time? In response, it is my position that autonomy has and always will be an absurd alibi in the discipline of architecture which is, at its very heart, a social-material practice. Even the most autonomously conceived object is exposed to the contamination of the messy facts of reality. Architecture simply isn't and never has been a lab experiment where you can isolate all of the variables you want out the equation. The impure constraints of the world shape a project more viscerally than the artificially conceived and seemingly "pure" constraints of the discipline.

An alibi is an excuse, or defense to avoid blame in a crime. Architecture, ultimately has very little control over how it is received by the world out there. The vacuum-like premise of autonomy is incompatible with that world. It is a romantic fantasy of the Howard Roark type that can only be talked about and attempted by the most privileged of the most privileged. The project of autonomy was originally premised as a radical critique of architectural ideology. With its roots in the political writings of Marxist historian Manfredo Tafuri and others, the position of autonomy posed a challenge to capitalist modes of production and a critical reflection of the place of architects within them. Instead, the term "critical" was hijacked by designers and theorists such as Peter Eisenman. It slowly transmogrified into an elitist, self-interested (and often self-referential) formalist discourse hell-bent on preserving "the discipline". This exclusionary conception of architecture constructs artificial boundaries between itself and anything deemed "other". Kudos to the marketing and showmanship of Eisenman and others like him for convincing generations of smart people, Ivy -educated students, educators, and even clients! (but interestingly, not the profession) to buy into the flimsy premise of an autonomous architecture.

At best, the project of autonomy is most interesting when it opens itself to the disfiguration of force and effect and the inevitable contingency of systems, flows, and people. It is my sense that these limitations of past autonomous form making have generally not informed today's shapes and figures. Rather, there has been a cherry-picked selection of forms and techniques from the 1970s that have now been passed through a digital lens. The figures are familiar, but the "critical", political aspirations of resistance to capitalist instrumentality, the status quo, or whatever the original "project" actually was—honestly, I never understood the argument—those aspirations have been lopped-off. What is left is a breezy veneer of autonomy or what Manfredo Tafuri might call a "delicate ideological veil" in a fundamentally altered cultural and socio-political context. It's unclear if that's been a conscious or unconscious decision. Not that they need to, but would the autonomy redux crew have anything to do with those ambitions or are they just attracted to replicating certain shapes and techniques? If the critical project was concerned with what architecture meant and the projective project was concerned with what it does, it is less clear what the new autonomy is after. As to whether this is the same road, I think it is, however the road has changed. In 1972, *Five Architects* was published. In the rousing introductory essay, Colin Rowe stated the unapologetically unrevolutionary premise of the work contained within. It was an open withdrawal from the social tenets of modernism and an open embrace of its aesthetic traits, and an elision from architecture all outside interests. Of course 1972 was also the date of the implosion of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project in St. Louis and the

so-called “death of modern architecture”. But perhaps more relevant is 1972, as noted by the geographer David Harvey, is the moment in which a “sea change” in cultural, political, and economic practices signaling the shift to the postmodern condition occurs. 40 plus years later, the project of autonomy, always subject to outside forces, now operates in much more diffuse landscape. While the discipline may have operated in a more tightly bound situation in 1970s with fewer, but more powerful outlets like the journal *Oppositions*, the contemporary media and blogosphere simultaneously opens more outlets for the showcasing of autonomous objects while diffusing the disciplinary agency those projects might hope to ever exercise. This leaves the often unpaid authors of those projects in a precarious position. Put another way, speculative projects on *coolarchitecture.com* don’t really pay the bills. Some level of the bemoaned “instrumentality” is necessary to operate today. Because the terrain has changed, it has left architects with much less agency and more vulnerable to exploitation and the vagaries of the market. The fallacy of the project of autonomy is that it results in a proliferation of individually authored projects, all subject to harsh edges of larger social-economic forces. It borrows modernist aesthetic cues and techniques—axonometric, defamiliarization, shock, montage—without understanding the fundamentally altered post-modern landscape in which it operates. It’s a kind of throwback theory. It neoconservatively preserves disciplinary boundaries and limits discussion and inclusion of a wider audience and broader conception of agency which grapples with very important issues—just to name a few-- race, gender, economy, accessibility, identity, and the environment. Koolhaas’ *Fundamentals* and projects like it carve out a dangerous fundamentalist position (and I hope we’re all anti-fundamentalist!) Ultimately, there is no neutral ground in the debate between autonomy and the contingent object.

Today, axonometric projections of cubes supplemented with turgid Deconstructivist prose masqueraded as “criticality” pitted against the status quo of the profession and capitalist instrumentality. Meanwhile, architecture became increasingly disengaged from emerging discourses on race and gender, technology, socioeconomics, and the environment. In the years leading up to the millennium, and perhaps due to globalization and a more robust market environment, autonomy faded and an interest in “projective” practices (purposely misnamed “post-critical” by detractors) emerged. Realizing how flimsy the proposition that architecture could ever operate autonomously is, projective practices were conceived as adaptive syntheses of architecture’s many contingencies. Rather than balling up and hiding from the world-at-large, projective practices creatively grappled with materiality, program, politics, and economics. In short, projective architecture dealt with force and effect. Despite this, decades later, the “project of autonomy” has been resurrected. Perhaps spurred by the crushing ennui of the so-called death of the “digital project”, the new project of autonomy acts as a kind of throw-back theory, nostalgically recreating the mistakes of an earlier generation. Blithely unaware of the utter failure of the earlier project of autonomy to catalyze any meaningful change, the new criticality parrots the aesthetics of an earlier generation with the help of updated tools (and minus the prose). “Autonomy”, rather than a radical challenge to architecture, serves as an absurd alibi for a “yolo” (you only live once) shape-play. Is such a position tenable? This article reflects on projects of autonomy (new and old) asking what they contribute to architecture as a discipline and profession. What, if anything, is at stake in such projects? What exactly is “critical architecture” critical of anymore? Ultimately, what makes autonomy such a seductive proposition.

ENDNOTES

1. Marcus Vitruvius Pollio. *Book 1 of De architectura [On architecture]*, trans. Morris Hicky Morgan, in *Vitruvius: The Ten Books on Architecture*. (New York: Dover, 1960) (1914), 5.
2. Allen, Stan. *Practice vs. Project*, in *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation*, (London: Routledge, 2009), xxi.
3. Tafuri, Manfredo, and Pellegrino D’acerno. *The Sphere and the Labyrinth Avant-Gardes and Architecture From the Piranesi to the 1970s*. (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1987). 150.
4. Rowe, Colin. “Introduction” *Five Architects: Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, Meier*. (New York. (Wittenborn, 1972),5.

Jencks, Charles, et al. *The Language of Post-modern Architecture*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).