

# Interstice and Symbiosis

## An Autonomy/Contingency Mash-up

K. Michael Hays declares, in his introduction to the *Oppositions Reader*,

“One should not ask whether architecture is autonomous, or whether it can willfully be made so, but rather how it can be that the question arises in the first place, what kind of situation allows for architecture to worry about itself to this degree.”<sup>1</sup>

This ‘worry’, as Hays puts it, recently beset the faculty of the architecture department at the Institute where I teach. When a committee working on revamping curricula proposed to expand the description for a new Adaptive Interventions minor beyond the assumed adaptive reuse moniker, the phrase “contingent conditions” became a flash point for certain faculty. One member declared that there “is no such thing as contingency in architecture”. Another claimed that architecture is static: it cannot adapt. The ensuing discussion revealed unresolved disagreements as to architecture’s identity. This seemed worth examining further. Given the recent recession and the resultant drop in enrollment for architecture schools, how the architecture department defined itself was critical.

Hays’ quote above questions certain self-important notions of just what architecture is or isn’t. (This seems an appropriate question, given that *Oppositions* was founded, developed and edited by Peter Eisenman, arguably a proud practicing autonomist during the 70’s and 80’s.) The quote is also reflective of a shift in architectural thought that Hays introduces in his analyses of Mies van der Rohe’s works. *Critical Architecture* -- as Hays proposes -- acknowledges the complex lives of buildings when they both propose and respond to form and human experience. I began to explore my own thoughts on the matter, and crafted a junior level seminar entitled *Contingency and its Implications for Architecture*, to understand what contingency is and what it might mean in contrast to autonomous form. Based upon work performed by my students as well as my own research, this paper proposes that there is presently a necessary, if sometimes tense, symbiosis between the autonomous and the contingent that enlivens the artifacts and dialogue of architecture.

### INTERSTICE

To move further into a perceived divide between theory and praxis, it’s possible that the interstice between the two camps navigates more deeply between the purported purity of autonomy and its freedom to advance theory, and of contingency in all of its messiness and pragmatism. One of our current theory-based proponents of the contingent architectural object (or subject) is Juhani Pallasmaa. His appeal for architectural phenomena – haptic,

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sensual, entirely human – does not divorce him from theoretical discourse. For him, it seems, the contingent is as much theory as experience. Pallasmaa identifies the poetics of architectural presence. His approach is not operative in the traditional sense, but defined by contingent stimuli: “In my view, architecture is a background phenomenon that creates settings for human events and acts of life”<sup>2</sup>. Pallasmaa goes on to state, “...profound architecture arises from facts, causalities, and experiences of life, not from artistic invention”<sup>3</sup>. While his voice still intimates an opposition to architecture as autonomous object, it is one that resonates with current sentiments of the contingent object as a powerful poetic and social construct.

By extension, Pallasmaa’s theoretical stance, in concert with professional works by designers such as Steven Holl and Peter Zumthor, reinterprets the ‘challenge’ of Critical Architecture that Hays identifies. Indeed, regarding the history of autonomy in architecture after his essay about Mies, Hays concludes that,

Although considerations of the internal, autonomous workings of architecture were never completely abandoned, attempts were made to transcode architecture’s effects into various other discourses, to recalibrate them according to what was sayable or thinkable in the idiolects of deconstruction, psychoanalysis, complexity theory, and other imported systems. These systems were not merely yoked together with architecture; rather, something of a shift of perspective and level took place in which the specific autonomous forms, operations, and practices could now more clearly be seen not as simply determined by a specific historical context, nor as free from any contextual constraint, but rather as reciprocally producing concepts whose ultimate horizon of effect lay outside of architecture’s internal systems of meaning construction.<sup>4</sup>

#### **THE JUNIOR SEMINAR**

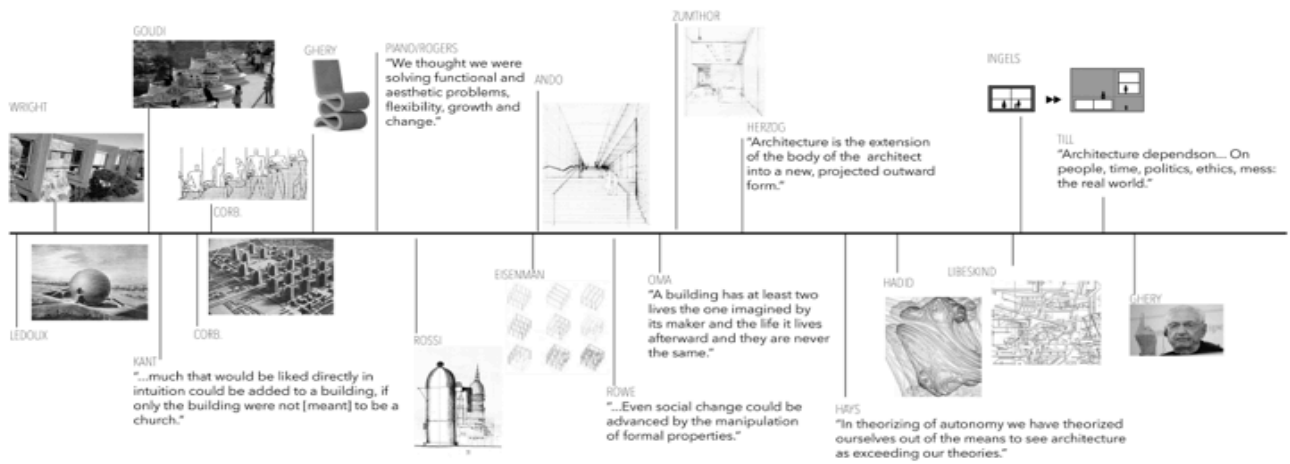
In the introductory level theory course, much of the students’ initial work involves comprehending the complexity of contingent subjects vis a vis autonomous objects, theory and practice. During the semester, students read essays on and debate definitions of autonomy, its roots in Kantian and Platonic philosophy, and its reaction to Positivism. They then begin identifying architects that commit to autonomous form making as they try and understand the value of ‘cardboard architecture’ as a theoretical tool.

In order to comprehend architecture as an ‘Instrument of Culture’<sup>5</sup>, students research cultural topics such as anthropology, place attachment theory in psychology, and making as a social activity. Students read anthropological essays that describe differing perceptions of the environment and its relevant artifacts (or lack thereof in the case of nomadic societies); phenomena as it pertains to both the psychology of place attachment and design theory; and political influences on a work of architecture -- from building codes and zoning to societal searches for meaning in its objects.

Based on the heuristic mission of the Institute, a methodology deployed in the seminar requires visualizing, then creating, graphic tools to research dialectics behind the autonomous object and the contingent subject. While there are also writing assignments, the students’ abilities to communicate their findings through visual means allow them to deploy the potential of architectural communication with a measure of agency. They first work through a graphic exercise to analyze and define autonomy and, by extension, contingency.

Students then design and create graphic novella-style case studies of a particular architect’s work from a list of known designers to further identify the sources of contingent inspiration. Participants work to articulate specific contingent factors as to how a design is generated, perceived and used. Examples of designers on the list include Louis Kahn, Luis Barragan, Glenn Murcutt, Tadao Ando, Bjarke Ingels of BIG, and Alvar Aalto, among others. This becomes a richly thought through assignment, where the connection between an architect’s

CONTINGENT.

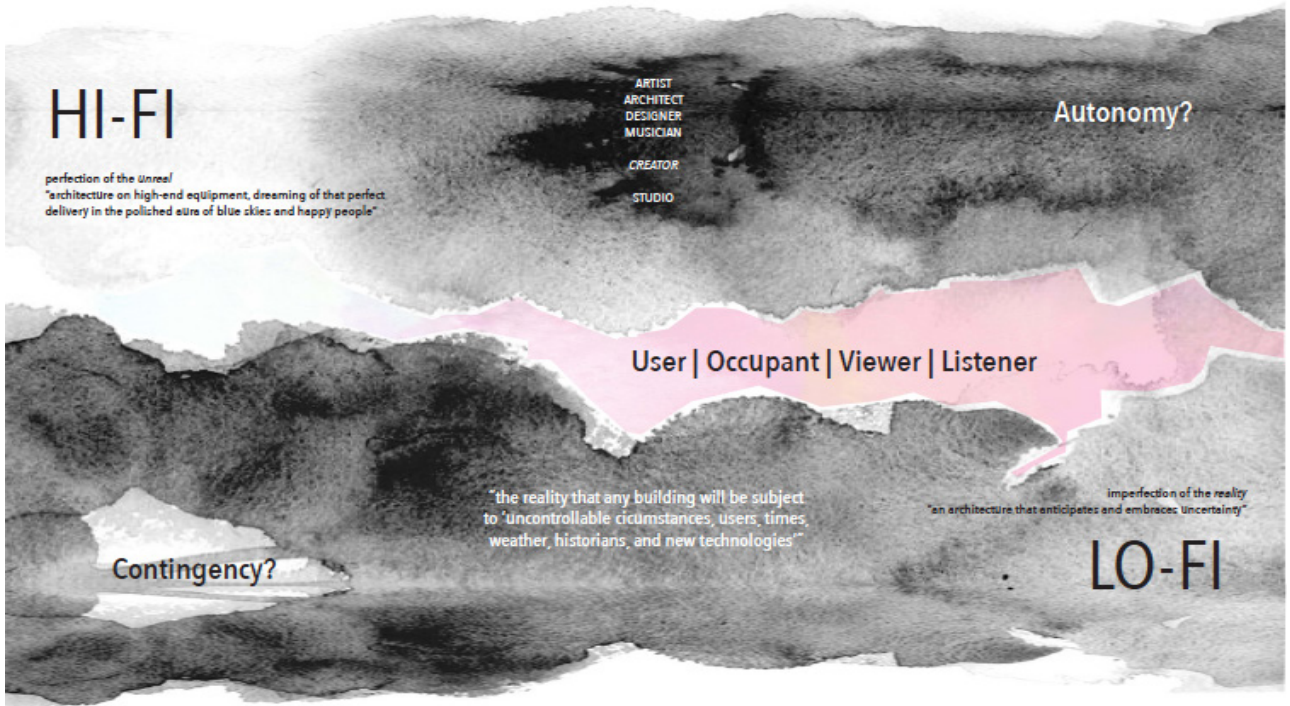


AUTONOMOUS.

1

I do not believe that autonomy can exist in pure form. Because of Users/occupants, contingency must exist- this is inevitable. The User/occupant is what bleeds the two together. The User/occupant forces the "HI-FI" to become the "LO-FI." The User/occupant forces reality.

Kate Lee

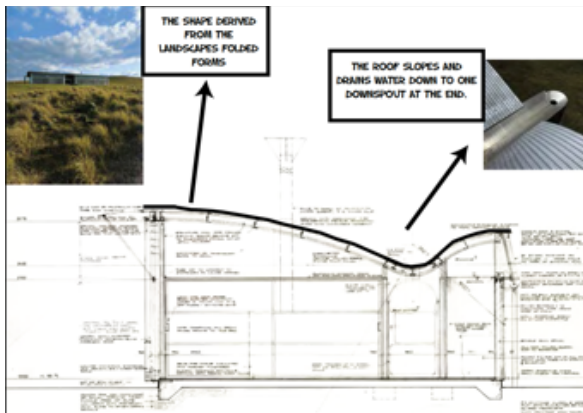
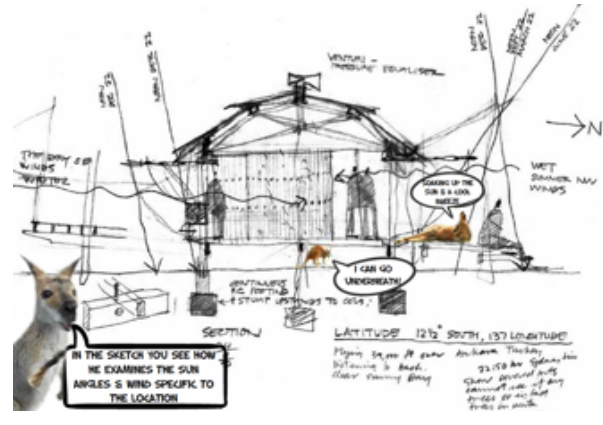


Casey, Michael J. "The Case for Contingency." Rev. of Architecture Depends. Web. TILL, Jeremy. Architecture Depends. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009. Print.

2

Figure 1: Hi-Fi, Lo-Fi, Katherine Lee\_1jpg

Figure 2: Timeline of an architectural dialectic, Matthew Matuska, \_2jpg



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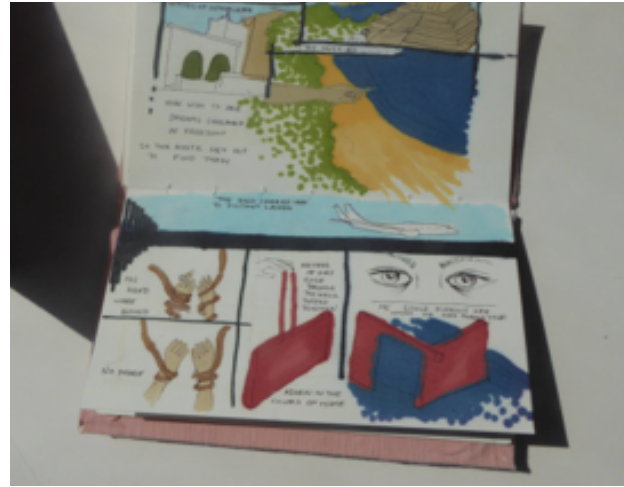
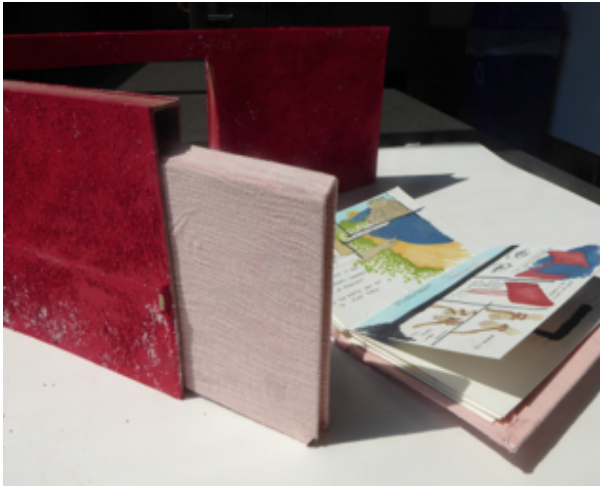
Figure 3: Excerpts from *The Quest For an Australian Style*, Megan Scherck \_3jpg

intention to engage the user, and the idea of creating a comic book as a humanistic, haptic way to engage others of their findings proves a fruitful and rewarding one.

Toward the end of the semester, the class's focus turns to humanitarian or Public Interest Design and how cultural, economic and sociopolitical influences inform current theory and practice. Here, they can understand how 'agency', -- a relatively new term in architectural circles -- in response to humanitarian and environmental crises push further into the mainstream's conscience now than they did 30 years ago, when Hays wrote *Critical Architecture*. Current architectural tasks of humanitarian design and environmental resilience respond to global urgencies: displacement of millions is increasingly seen as part of the architect's purview to resolve, as is environmental stewardship. And yet, beauty as a social value also matters. These issues can also further theoretical discourse: Praxis and theory can coexist, informing one another through threads of time and need.

In the same way that, 30 years ago, Hays declared a 'Critical Architecture' as a place between the two, now there are examples of contingent interpretations such as Heroic Architecture—a lofty and socially engaging term – which redefines Brutalism as retrospectively humane. Another example is Landscape Urbanism which examines uses for existing urban interstitial space. As these allude to, it is possible to reverse-engineer our understanding of the debate in new, relevant for our time, ways. Those who might be considered current autonomists (Zaha Hadid, for example) might be considered 'operationalists', based on emerging technologies that facilitate performing particular actions upon the architectural object. However, given both current environmental and social need, it is not necessarily 'pure', in the historical, Kantian sense of the word. As Hays later states,

Architecture theory's phobia of a language of sentiments that might register the



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desires and pleasures of things, images, and experiences suggests that the autonomy thesis be understood as a “reaction formation” during a “latency period” of architectural theory...to read architecture as an isomorph of the categories and operations of theory can be as reductive as those readings that trace architecture to an inevitable reflection of a wholly predictable technological or economic context, that give no reciprocal force to architecture as a social production. In our successful theorizing of autonomy we have theorized ourselves out of the means to see architecture as exceeding our theories.<sup>6</sup>

#### SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND MASH-UPS

There is a history of the two schools of thought/practice pulsing against one another in an alternating current, from Alberti to Hadid and, conversely, Shigeru Ban. The notion of architecture as pure operational form, for all of its complexity, appears limited, and as Hays explains, reductive. One finds parallels between the heyday of autonomy and Hays’ writing of ‘Critical Architecture’, and the current economics of practice. With a looming recession in 1984 and the crash of 2008, both represent latency periods for architectural practice. Both recessions had architects turning inward, reflecting on what architecture might be or is. But the difference is in the ways in which the discipline responded each time: The response of the ‘80s recession was one of self – critique and theoretical exploration. For the ‘aughts, the reflection was perhaps more existential and more practice driven: what is the value of architecture? How do we remain relevant?

Architecture’s relevance relies on its ability to act as specialized generalist between focal points. Architects often work within symbiotic relationships between those involved in the design process and the subsequent experience of the built form. It seems likely that, given increasing advances in fabrication and technology, the autonomous object will be a seductive, viable entity; whether it has the luxury to exist in a self-referential world remains to be seen. But ultimately, designers -- theorists as well as practitioners -- bring their personal contingencies of history, place, meaning, and notions of shelter to the discourse. By virtue of the relative permanence of the architectural object over time, it becomes both contingent AND a point from which to generate theories beyond limits of autonomy, even if the original intent was to create pure, self-referential form.

As students worked through the material of the junior level course, the question became, what is NOT contingent, ultimately? This may be a rhetorical question, but one that opens a door to perhaps a wider exploration by both camps as a larger co-existent, mashed up entity as opposed to a dialectic, self-worried discussion.

Figure 4: Excerpts from ‘Barragán wall’ book holder design and detail of comic book no. 1 of 2, about Luis Barragán  
Karen Alvarez\_4jpg

## ENDNOTES

1. Hays, K. Michael, ed., *Oppositions Reader*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1998, p.ix. Print.
2. Pallasmaa, Juhani, *Voices of Tranquility: Silence in Art and Architecture*, Neveu, M. and Djavaherian, N., eds. *Architecture's Appeal*, Routledge press, 2014. P. 201. Print
3. *ibid*, p.202
4. Hays, K. Michael, *Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form Perspecta*, Vol. 21, 1984. p.16. Print and online.
5. Hays, K. Michael, *Autonomy and Architecture*, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics: Autonomy*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com:80/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0053>
6. *Ibid*, p. 27

## POST CONFERENCE REFLECTIONS

It is possible that some answers rely on redefining a critical architecture for our time by first understanding what autonomy might mean now. How we define that for our time will call the basic definition into question. Autonomy could well be quite different than its historical roots as an 'uninfluenced' object. Perhaps it's more about an autonomous governing entity, or a symbolic icon specific to a particular culture, or political rather than architectural, per se. A reevaluation of the autonomous entity in design also requires a look at how contingency is defined as well as a review into the 'why' of a need for both the autonomous and contingent object/subject. To speculate, this seems about contingent practicable relationships between specialists for the built environment, evident within the praxis of collaboration, which, at its root, is less about the object itself. Is it about a search for relevance in an increasingly automated and vulnerable profession, based on changing public need? The architectural object is both a piece to behold from afar as well as an environment to subjectively experience. Critical architecture now is perhaps more an architecture of engagement, where dialectic impulses are diminished.

As synthetic thinkers, architects are trained to work with symbioses; perhaps dialectical thinking between the autonomous and the contingent object is less the point. Hays began to identify the strength of an interstitial strategy of Mies' work thirty years ago, by positioning culture and form under the umbrella of Critical Architecture. Perhaps it's currently less of an umbrella, and more of a weave composed of influences from the ground up as well as the top down. Then as now, critical architecture still speaks to certain universal truths, but quite differently than they did in 1984 due to current global and economic conditions. We need beauty and humanity with ethically informed function; including, but not exclusive to architecture, we should 'worry' about it all.