

On Relevance: An Argument for a Return to Modernism in the Criticism, History, and Practice of Architecture

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The “Frankfurter Küche” designed by Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky for Ernst May’s Römerstadt housing development of 1926.

IN THE ESSAY TO FOLLOW, WE UNDERTAKE AN OSTENSIBLY BENIGN TASK TO define a simple expression and answer a simple question: what is it for the discipline of architecture to be *relevant*? What does a praxis of architecture entail? But the pitfalls of such an endeavor are apparent. How can one possibly pose a question of *relevance* without asking “to what ends?” or “to whose interests?” Can an objective theory of *relevance* possibly be detached from normative interests when, after all, common parlance suggests that they are one and the same?

We vie with this riddle of *relevance* – this paradox – not entirely for its own sake. Our theory of *relevance* serves as a cast from which we can read the impression of our real object: the practice of building and the critique and theory of *praxis* by architects, critics, and historians. In other words, the *relevant* discourse of architecture that interests us is the one that practices building, the one that builds, and the one whose theories and practices of building engage the public and not just colleagues within the discipline. It is in this light that we ask our readers to scrutinize our method and to assess the promise of our theory.

AT A CERTAIN MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE, IN THE first decade of the new century and again between the world wars, the questions of “to what ends?” and “to whose interests?” presented no obstacle for many optimistic, modernist architects and designers participating in what they believed to be a wholly new basis for architecture. Indeed, the theories of the time took for granted some universalistic notion that the practice and theory of architecture are intrinsically *relevant* to everyday life – *relevant* to, if you will, the masses. In a 1929 essay “bauhaus und gesellschaft,” Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer wrote of the discipline:

thus we take the structure and the vital needs
of our society as given.
we seek to achieve
the widest possible survey of the people’s life,
the deepest possible insight into the people’s soul,
the broadest possible knowledge of the community.
as creative designers
we are the servants of this community.
our work is service to the people.¹

¹ Schnaidt, p 99. “sonach erachten wir als gegeben die struktur und die lebensbedürfnisse unserer volksgemeinschaft. wir erstrebenden größtmöglichen überblick über das volksleben,

While Meyer's was but one story in an arena of competing claims about architectural Modernism – specifically of *Neue Sachlichkeit* functionalism – he captures an underlying logic with which even the most expressionist Modernists grappled: Architecture *qua* architecture is bound to the *vita activa*. It is bound to what Hannah Arendt would later describe as people's labor (to secure and consume the necessities for life itself), their work (to produce and create beyond these necessities), and finally, their political and social activity.²

The interest of modern architects in the *vita activa* was not incidental, but a response to an emerging conundrum of cultural production endemic of industrialization. Georg Simmel, in the role of cultural critic, noted that “in periods of social complexity and an extensive division of labor, the accomplishments of culture come to constitute an autonomous realm.”³ As the pace of objective cultural production accelerates, it becomes detached from its own capacity to be “a general means for the cultivation of many individual souls.” “Things” he claimed, “are becoming more and more cultivated, while men are less able to gain from the perfection of objects a perfection of the subjective life.” Modern architects took it upon themselves to engage the complex, new social and production relations characteristic of modern, capitalist society. The practice of architecture became a committed reckoning with the level of subjective culture and with the human condition; as noted before, with everyday life.

All the same, Hannes Meyer's approach to this problem of architecture, like those of his expressionist counterparts, was particularistic and conditioned by the specific circumstances of his time. (“Building,” he had announced in an earlier manifesto – a picture of Weber's bureaucratic legitimacy – “is only organization: social, technical, economic, psychological organization.”)⁴ And we may well conclude, as does the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, that the dialectic of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and Expressionism has long since run its course.⁵ But the impulse of the *vita activa* was not new to this one dialectic in the history of architectural modernism. Moreover, it extended beyond this particular dialectic into Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's formalism and doctrine of universal space, as well as into the various manifestations of *Großstadtarchitektur* and *Urbanisme*, of Ernst May in Frankfurt, Ludwig Hilbersheimer in Chicago, Martin Wagner and Bruno Taut in Berlin, and Le Corbusier in Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and Algiers. What, then, can be inferred from this new, durable logic that typified the practice of modern architecture in the first half of the twentieth-century?

In the case of these eminent architects, taking a position vis-à-vis the human condition was both their normative orientation and also a structural characteristic of the discourse in which they participated – an organizing principle around which the discourse of modern architecture was formed. *Consider that relevance, if we may describe this logic as such, is basically a meaningful relation between an idea and the practical situation of the beneficiary of that idea. The relevance of a discourse, then, is the propensity of the discourse to produce ideas that effect such relations.* In our

die größtmögliche einsicht in die volksseele, die größtmögliche kenntnis dieser volksgemeinschaft. als gestalter sind wir diener dieser volksgemeinschaft. unser tun ist dienst am volke.”

2 c.f. Arendt's *The Human Condition*. The concepts of *labor*, *work*, and *action*, the illumination of which occupies the book as a whole, are summarized briefly at the beginning of the first chapter, pp 7–8.

3 Simmel, “Subjective Culture,” pp 233–4.

4 Schnaidt, p 97. “bauen ist nur organisation: soziale, technische, ökonomische, psychische organisation.” orig. in Meyer, “bauen.”

5 c.f. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, particularly pp 109–12 in chapter 5, “‘Radical’ Architecture and the City.”

case, *relevance* is the set of conditions under which architectural discourse produces theories and buildings that posit practical ideas about the everyday use and consumption of the built environment, which are in turn discussed, debated, negotiated, and appropriated by an engaged public. That the particular logic of the *vita activa* was common to the assorted stories that comprise modernism in architecture is paradoxically both incidental – in that it was the normative stance of the individuals who made up the discourse – and indispensable – in that involvement with the network of participants to the discourse obliged it. Content and structure. Chicken and egg. How quickly we arrive at the crux of the matter!

Our efforts in this paper will be directed at theorizing an operational definition of *relevance*, one which brackets the specific, normative content of architectural ideologies in order to mediate the distinction between the structure of the discourse and its contents. After all, modern architects did not theorize in a vacuum, indifferent to the reception and political fate of their architecture. They advanced, exchanged, and refined their ideas over concrete networks of other architects, designers, artists, critics, politicians, and industrialists, as well as over networks of buildings, consumer goods, sites, and material and construction technologies. These discursive practices and structures over which their ideas were diffused, not to mention the “‘things’, ‘agents’, ‘actants,’ *with which* they have to share the action,”⁶ provided both the raw materials and the constraints for the theories and buildings of modern architects. And while the ideologies they formulated were imprinted with and reproduced these networks and practices, at the same time they critiqued and transformed them, producing new materials and new constraints. In this process of “structuration,” the condition of *relevance* is paradoxically both independent of the substance and at the same time constituted by the content of the discourse. “Reflections,” Anthony Giddens proposes, “continually enter into, become disentangled with, and re-enter the universe of events that they describe.”⁷

It is not the details of ideologies and stories that bring about the *relevance* of the discourse for its public or clientele, but rather the cyclical exchange between the ideas proper and the concrete, evolving patterns of personal, professional, and material relations over which these ideas must be promoted and developed. To extricate an objective theory of *relevance* from its normative ends, we must move beyond the dualism of content and structure. But in order to transcend this paradox, it is necessary to identify the mechanisms by which the structure of the discourse – this network of relations between architects, critics, things, et al. – mediates the contents of theories. In other words, given the practices and structures in place at the time and their implications for the protagonists, what range of action or thought was available to the practitioners and theorists of modern architecture? What new stories were within the realm of possibilities and therefore even able just to be conceived, much less propagated? While validating a familiar understanding of *relevance* as an active regard for the human condition, we will move beyond this subjective position to reveal the operative, structural condition of *relevance* in the discipline of architecture: how the concrete networks and practices of architects engendered a climate for architectural theories and typologies that engaged a broader public.

The essay to follow offers two means by which *relevance* becomes social structure and structure effects *relevance*. The first is that a normative idea or ideology

6 Latour, “Promises,” p 31.

7 Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, p xxxiii.

– e.g. Meyer’s notion that the practice of architecture should take the structure and needs of society as its givens – comes, over time, to constitute a trajectory or meta-narrative for the discourse, around which new theories are obliged to organize. This obligation is not tantamount to the hegemony of the specific idea or ideology, but rather, it results from the simple, pragmatic fact that a new theory is only comprehensible insofar as it is appropriate to the thread of the foregoing discussion. Just as with scientific inquiry, the “normal” course of architectural theory operates within broader paradigms, which are generally already available in the discourse. To put the argument more abstractly, the presence of given normative ideas in the history of the discourse constitute a constraint on its future paths, limiting the range of possibilities for future action and theorizing. Paradigm shifts occur, to be sure! But even those who break paradigms are responding to their contemporaries and to disjunctures between existing paradigms. Thomas Kuhn, in his theory of scientific revolutions, goes on to suggest that the invention of truly revolutionary, alternative theories is “not even very difficult,” but that a significant crisis in the discourse must first warrant such invention: “As in manufacture – retooling is an extravagance to be reserved for the occasion that demands it.”⁸ And indeed, novel paradigms are assessed in the discourse not for their objective fit with reality, but in light of the particular, historical crises with which they are contending.

The second means by which *relevance* and social structure interrelate suggests that objective characteristics of the social and professional networks we alluded to before predict the propensity of the discourse produced by those networks to effect either degrees of *relevance* or, conversely, of abstraction. These networks constitute the political field on which architectural theories and designs are tested, valued, and exchanged, and the discourse tends toward praxis when architects themselves have particular patterns of relations with one another and with actors in neighboring disciplines. This does not suggest that in the course of a political or economic process, architectural ideas are compromised; rather that these processes are what motivate critique and theory in the first place. The political and economic structures of a discourse are integrated into and integral to the ideas the discourse produces. Structure and content are from the outset coincidental.

OUR ARGUMENT HAS ANOTHER, NORMATIVE AND, INDEED, CALCULATED PURPOSE vis-à-vis the present discourse of architecture. The concept of *relevance* poses a challenge to the contemporary practices of architectural history and criticism: not to strive for a stricter standard of scholarship or for a greater level of detail, but rather a different methodological paradigm.

Such a shift is warranted in the face of a practice of architecture embracing first an ironic postmodernism and later an anxious deconstructivism. Critics and historians rightly questioned grand *Zeitgeist* narratives like Sigfried Giedion’s *Space, Time, and Architecture* and then also intellectual histories like Reyner Banham’s *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, the former for their operativity and exclusivity and the latter for the tenuousness of the links between one idea and another. Nevertheless, both of these now contested historical methodologies had construed the discourse of architecture as a field of accumulating scientific knowledge, and in so doing, they provided the normative basis for the belief of critics and architects alike in the inherent *relevance* of architecture for everyday life. The Modern project of a comprehensive and objective synthesis

8 Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*, p 76.

[or history] of the discourse as a whole was abandoned when, as a result of the deconstructivist turn, the focus of criticism turned to more tractable and more easily defensible regional- and micro-history. Even the Marxist dialectician, Manfredo Tafuri, claimed to have found refuge in becoming “detached from the Architecture problem” that occupied *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* and *Progetto e utopia*, turning his historical investigation instead to “highly specific studies rather than general essays.”⁹

Two long-standing, normative practices in the discipline of architectural history and criticism have compelled the turn away from comprehensive surveys and broad claims of objectivity. The first is that the discipline venerates the individual architect – his genius – as the locus of innovation in architectural design and theory. And the second is that the discipline takes as its units of analysis, *ideas* about architecture and *ideas* about the role of building. These suppositions seem reasonable, *prima facie*. But suffice it to say that deprived of the notion of *Zeitgeist* and grasping for evidence of consistent, concrete links between one architect’s theories and another’s, critics and historians working in the face of the prevailing deconstructivism are hard pressed to substantiate much more than meticulous micro-historical, regional, and psychological assertions. If they suggest them at all, scholars readily concede that their more comprehensive conclusions and broader narratives are subjective hypotheses: a spin on the story.¹⁰ Indeed, the two practices sketched out above have whittled away at what conventional criticism can claim objectively, warranting the shift in methodology we are proposing, as well as a reconsideration of the object and of agency in architectural history and criticism.

In order to begin to reassemble our micro-histories, we need an understanding of processes and the dynamics of interaction within the discourse of architecture. So long as the unit of analysis in contemporary criticism continues to be *ideas* about architecture, then architectural history and criticism are bound to the disjunctures and contradictions inherent in these normative, historical ideas. They are bound to subjective narrative constructions and to the impossibility of a history that is both comprehensive and coherent. If the focus of architectural criticism were to shift to the concrete, interpersonal relations into which ideas and theories are born, then the processes of architectural production could be disentangled from the substance of specific ideas generated in the particular, historical discourse. The study of the genesis of ideas *between* people – of what Georg Simmel calls *Vergesellschaftung* or “sociation” – would supply the basis for an objective historicity of the discourse, one which is relieved of subjective meanings and vain attempts at the coherence of disparate and particularistic ideas. Given the tractable processes of transaction and diffusion of ideas that follow from the concept of sociation, a meta-narrative would emerge independently, providing a scaffold into which the substance of the ideas can then be reinserted and reconsidered. The Modern project of objectivity, I will argue, is feasible.

This Simmelian moment of sociation, where structure and unique content are indistinguishable – indeed where the unique substance of the idea constitutes structure – forms the basis for both the theorization of *relevance* and its corollary for the practice of architectural history.

WE BORROW FROM SIMMEL NOT ONLY A KEY CONCEPT, BUT ALSO A FORM AND an apology, that the material to follow Cannot be expressed “as a central argu-

⁹ “The culture markets,” p 39.

¹⁰ c.f. Calquhoun, et al.

ment whose proof is gradually adduced, but only as a collection of arguments that find themselves under the title of a concept.”¹¹ In the end, the argument will be constructed of the raw material of sometimes parallel, sometimes crosscutting lines of reasoning. It is itself a network of supporting evidence. The critique, moreover, has a dual subject, first of the discourse of architectural modernism between the world wars, and second of the climate of contemporary architectural criticism and history.

We begin in the first part of the argument, entitled *Currencies of Practice*, with an elaboration on the theory of sociation in order to both critique and recover the modern goal of universalism. The second part, on *Multivocality*, acknowledges that the moment of sociation takes place in the context of a network of relations. Depending on the structure of these relations, actors may adopt different stratagems vis-à-vis the agendas of their publics, leading either to *relevance*, or conversely, to abstraction. And in the third section, *Artifact and Storage*, we demonstrate how buildings themselves become “social” actors and shape the discourse of architecture. These objects in the discourse, moreover, play an integral role in the shift in the structure of architectural discourse away from the modernist logic of the *vita activa* in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Currencies of Practice

In 1910, the Berlin office of the architect Peter Behrens was occupied with the design of a turbine factory for German manufacturing magnate Emil Rathenau’s Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG), for which Behrens was, at the time, the new chief artistic director. The factory’s design was remarkable not only for its formal, aesthetic qualities, but for the implicit, insurgent claim that the design of *factories* falls within the purview of architects and that this “industrial architecture” necessitates its own aesthetic and vocabulary. Indeed, the very notion that an electrical manufacturing company would employ an artistic director was indicative of the recent convergence of the respective interests of design and industry. The turbine factory helped set one story about Modernism in motion. Bound up as it was with the nationalistic aims of the *Deutsche Werkbund*, the act of its design was an act of creative, economic, and political speech.

But there were more than just buildings on the boards in Peter Behrens’ Berlin office: there were the careers of three young interns, then all but unknown to the discipline, named Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (later, *Le Corbusier*). Architectural critic and historian Peter Blake characterized the now much ballyhooed meeting of the three men, who would later become icons of modern architecture, as “one of the most remarkable coincidences in the story of architecture.”¹²

¶ 1.1 TWO MODELS OF HISTORY

While the specifics of Peter Blake’s reading of architectural history may no longer represent the center of the contemporary discourse in architecture, the methodology of his *The Master Builders* is nevertheless consistent with what are still the prevailing practices in architectural history and criticism. In the preface to the book which documents the professional lives of Le Corbusier, Ludwig

¹¹ Simmel, “Group Expansion,” p 251.

¹² Blake, p 15.

Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright, Blake argues for the autonomy of the aesthetic object, which in his view is not to be evaluated in the light of any external circumstances. For him, the history of architecture is written in the *œuvres* of its geniuses – both in their ideas and in built work. The context of the production is immaterial: “no ‘force’ – economic, sociological, technological – ... could have created Ronchamp, the Barcelona Pavilion, or Taliesin West.”¹³ It follows that if in Blake’s particular model of architectural history genius exists *ex ante* within the person of the architect, then the convergence of Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Jeanneret on the same office before their individual theories were formulated, much less known and discussed within the discipline, must indeed have been an historical accident. The “coincidence” of their encounter precludes the hypothesis that the eventual success of these designers might, in fact, have been correlated with their turns at Behrens’ office. For Blake, the genius of these three men was inevitable, written into their futures when they were yet draftsmen.

This romantic treatment of genius in Blake is reminiscent of the charismatic pronouncements of Howard Roak, the protagonist in Ayn Rand’s *Fountainhead*, who claims that ultimately “men of unborrowed vision” are compelled to go ahead with the making of history *in spite of* those social circumstances that would hold them back. (And it is perhaps less than happenstance that the critical discourse of the profession seems to have embraced that individualist philosophy whose literary advocate chose architecture as the vocation for her *everyman*). Nevertheless, such a history of autonomous aesthetic production *a priori* proscribes the notion that genius itself is cultivated and that the creative acts of geniuses are responsive to contemporaneous issues in the discourse. In treating architectural works as isolated and isolatable artistic statements, Blake must presuppose that the aesthetic value of a building is an immutable property of its material form.

In fact, Peter Blake’s apologia for individualism as the engine of architectural history is itself part of a dialectical exchange. The structural models at which it is aimed maintain that the theoretical and aesthetic production of a discipline is the byproduct of discourse or of social process. One such model is Pierre Bourdieu’s account of the mechanisms by which distinction among groups is realized, and while *La Distinction* postdates Blake’s history of Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Wright by two decades, their respective epistemological lineages are clearly in dialogue with one another. Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and *field* have recently been applied specifically to the profession of architecture by Garry Stevens in *The Favored Circle*. Steven’s book is an apposite counterpoint to *The Master Builders*.

Blake critiques structural explanations of architectural history for failing to acknowledge the autonomous merit or meaning of *works* of architecture. And indeed, Garry Stevens skirts the difficult matter of evaluating architectural works altogether, suggesting instead that the assessment of buildings in the professional discourse simply mirrors the assessment of the status of the architect in a parallel social field.¹⁴ The struggle of individual participants for status translates into a system of behaviors and practices – a *habitus* – which then becomes a benchmark of performance within the discipline that is reproduced and reinforced over time. The degree to which individuals are able to interpret and conform to this ideal determines their social ordering, which, in turn, governs the assessment of the

¹³ Ibid. Preface, p xv.

¹⁴ Stevens, p 32.

value of their respective aesthetic *œuvres*. What come to constitute “good” theory and “good” architecture are merely those ideas and buildings that best reproduce the social order of the profession. Good projects are those designed by favored architects, and architects become favored by conforming to current ideals within the discourse – with respect to political ideology and aesthetic theory, obviously, but also with regard to cultural milieu and demographic characteristics. As Stevens sees it, this hegemony of the field, or *habitus*, determines the trajectory of the discourse irrespective of any objective value of the particular buildings and theories that are produced as a result. Aesthetic production is simply an echo of the social field from which it emanates.

Seen as such, that three aspiring architects who demonstrate great promise might meet while working under the tutelage of a prominent, avant-garde architect seems quite probable. Not only was the offer of employment in Peter Behrens’ office already a means of social and professional selection, but such an internship would have been a likely springboard in the education of any architectural genius-in-training. The opportunity to work closely with so central a figure in the discipline as Behrens would have enabled the up-and-comers to immerse themselves in the contemporary discourse, to fully understand its competing myths, and, in turn, to later play such prominent roles in the shaping of the discipline.

Granted, Stevens’ particular analysis of the discipline of architecture falls short of Bourdieu’s theory of distinction. But even if it lived up to the theory from which it draws, do social structure and social practices, by themselves, provide for a satisfactory history of physical objects, of real buildings? Works of architecture, like works of fine art in other mediums, are talked-up and promoted, of course. Their economic and cultural value is negotiated and re-negotiated by architects within the field and also in dialogue with artists, politicians, industrialists, the public, and a clientele. But what an analysis such as Stevens’ precludes is that buildings themselves may act as statements within the discourse. And while it follows that the action constituted by the design and construction of a building should be coherent within the progression and thread of contemporaneous discourse, it need not necessarily kowtow to a specific, historical system of behaviors and practices. If we consider buildings in this light as material acts of speech, they take on exactly the role that Stevens denies them: of shaping the direction of discourse. Buildings speak to one another, not only to propagate and epitomize ideas passed over from verbal discourse, but to transform, elaborate, and supplant them. An architectural project is a rejoinder to what has gone before: it takes a stand that can express accord, continuation, rebuttal, etc., but which may also to some degree subtly redirect the momentum of the discourse and, *ipso facto*, the relative alignment of all the participants to the discourse. The discourse of architecture is thus comprised not only of an evolving order of architects and of their talk about buildings, but also of the design process proper and of buildings themselves.

If buildings and architectural theories are not autonomous works that point toward Truth, but rather are speech acts in dialogue with one another, where does Peter Blake’s notion of genius fit in? If an architectural work or theory is part of a thread of discourse and must mark a relation to what has previously been claimed, whence does progress come? And what role does the material fact of a concrete, particular building play in discourse, after all? The remainder of this section of our essay as well as the next will be devoted to an argument that acts of genius are not the definitive, autonomous acts of independent men, but improvisations: continuous, inventive play off various forms of feedback in a

field of discourse. Moreover, disjunctures in an existing discourse are the impetus for innovation and provide the opportunity for genius.

The third question, concerning the theory and treatment of objects in architectural history and criticism, will be taken up in the closing section of our essay. Ironically, both of the historical models described above follow from a common, erroneous ontological premise. Both purport to know *a priori* the nature of the material, aesthetic artifact; that is to say, how the object interacts and behaves in a discourse. An elaboration of this point will follow, but suffice it to say that both models conflate what a physical object or building *means* – which is a product of discourse – with what the object *does* – which is an immutable characteristic of the object. Without the benefit of an analytical separation of these two concepts, Stevens and Blake fall on different sides of the fence with regard to the disposition of the material artifact. Blake can argue for the autonomy of objects only by regarding the aesthetic object as an immutable carrier of meaning, but the inferences drawn from such a methodology are all too easily deconstructed for the subjective interpretations that they ultimately are. Stevens, on the other hand, excises the need for a theory of objects only by taking for granted that the aesthetic object reflects social discourse and process, but he discounts the very real limitations and possibilities that space and architectural typologies afford their occupants.

The Idea and the Practice of Modern Freedom

Georg Simmel suggests that the epistemology adopted by modern architects (and concomitantly by critics and historians) – the conviction that autonomous ideas spring from the minds of autonomous architects – has its own contentious evolution originating in the Enlightenment philosophy of freedom. The emergence of this epistemology in both the practice and in the history of architecture is worth reconsidering in light of the unsatisfactory dialectic that we have described above.

Simmel argues that the early form of individual freedom that emerged in the Renaissance was, in fact, merely a means of distinction. It constituted no break with social institutions and practice; indeed, these means of distinction were a basis for, rather than a subversion of, social ordering. The subsequent Enlightenment notion of freedom moved well beyond these superficial practices of differentiation. The concern of the proponents of the Enlightenment was for freedom from inequalities imposed by social and political institutions. Indeed, they trusted that the expression of individual freedoms would ultimately reveal the fundamental equality of people. *Liberté* and *égalité* were not discrete concepts, but ones that were believed to reveal one another in practice.

This latter idea of freedom, Simmel laments, has its own teleology. It is not that equality as an ideal becomes marginalized, *per se*, but that in the face of unquenchable freedom, equality becomes untenable in practice. “After the individual had been liberated in principle from the rusty chains of guild, hereditary status, and church, the quest for independence continues to the point where individuals who had been rendered independent in this way wanted also to distinguish themselves from one another.”¹⁵ Individuals then reinstitute the very same inequities from which the ideal of freedom was intended to spare them, but in the second go-round, this inequality is purportedly “determined only from within,” which presumably justifies the contradiction. In this way, the modern philosophy of individualism arises. Freedom for Rand and Blake is

¹⁵ Simmel, “Freedom and the Individual,” p 222.

neither a means of distinction nor freedom from inequality, but the articulation of inequality itself. Paraphrasing Schleiermacher, Simmel writes that under this new manifestation of individualism, “Each individual is called to realize his own, his very own prototype.”¹⁶ The responsibility and the capacity to create, innovate, produce, achieve, etc. lie with the individual; moreover, true innovation lies beyond the capacity of social institutions and the bounds of social norms. It requires the exercise of freedom.

Even so, a remnant of the ideal of *égalité* persists in this new freedom in the form of the universal. The increasing differentiation and inequality derive merely from the unique capacities with which each individual, i.e. each genius, strives after and represents the universal. So while the product of each individual’s activity is a “unique configuration,” it is at the same time a reflection back on Form and belongs to that “synthesis of the forces that constitute the universe.”¹⁷

Given the various normative ideas filtering through the practice of architecture in the early part of the twentieth century, it is easy enough to see how the undercurrent of individualism swept its way into the practices of architectural criticism and history, as well. After all, the expressionists, on the one hand, and their formalist and functionalist counterparts, on the other, are representative of the two poles of the oxymoronic unequal equality. While the buildings of Henri van de Velde and Bruno Taut underscore the distinctiveness of expression itself, the works of Peter Behrens and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe stress the role of the architect to reveal universal types and forms. But the general form of individualism is common to both.¹⁸ These normative theories of architecture contained their own mechanism for historical explanation, which was further propagated in the theory and practice of architecture by Sigfried Giedion’s operative *Space, Time, and Architecture*, which for three decades was the profession’s own definitive history of the modern movement. And while the general methodology of Reyner Banham’s *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* – the anthology which would succeed Giedion’s in this role – differed substantially from its predecessor, the undercurrent of individualism remained.

THE CHALLENGE FOR A HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE IS TO decouple the normative beliefs of modern architects from the real effects of the philosophy of individualism on the practice of architecture. It is one thing for the participants in a discipline to believe that the responsibility and the capacity to create, innovate, produce, achieve, etc. lie with the individual, i.e. with the genius. This conviction, Simmel reveals, is irrespective of the actual processes by which innovations happen and by which they are evaluated. In scrutinizing the exercise of freedom for itself, as opposed to the historical evolution of the idea of freedom, Simmel arrives at a paradox: that autonomous, individualistic action is social in its implications. In “Sociology, Studies of the Forms of Socation,” he argues that man’s default condition is to be embedded within social relations. As much as acts of creativity, innovation, and genius necessitate the pursuit and exercise of freedom from these relations, this freedom is a choice on the part of the individual that she must relentlessly pursue, and not a state-of-being that

¹⁶ Ibid., p 224.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The collectivist theories of certain *Neue Sachlichkeit* circles are an important exception to our generalization about the individualist tendencies of Modern architects. Even in these circles, however, disputes arose with regard to credit for particular projects. Hannes Meyer, whose collectivist pedagogical agenda was a relentless source of controversy during his tenure as director of the Bauhaus, nevertheless split with his longtime professional partner, Hans Wittwer, over the issue of credit for the ADGB Bundesschule in Bernau.

can be realized once and for all. Insofar as it is possible, the choice to be indifferent to binding social ties (that are, after all, the norm) constitutes a negative, nevertheless social, act:

Thus, the absence of relations, as a negative social behavior, is almost never a secure possession but an incessant release from ties which actually limit the autonomy of the individual or which ideally strive to do so. Freedom is not solipsistic existence but sociological action. It is not a condition limited to the single individual but a relationship, even though it is a relationship from the standpoint of the individual.¹⁹

The autonomy of the individual who pursues this social behavior consists entirely in the choice of freedom *from* [the limiting bonds of social relations] and not of freedom *to* [create, innovate, produce, achieve, etc.] Needless to say, the exercise of such freedom has practical repercussions for the very social ties of which the individual becomes “independent.” What’s more, in the case of the modern architects we are taking as our subject, the act of subjectively claiming and proclaiming a particular form of individuality implicitly acknowledges the binding structures and practices to which these architects claim to be indifferent. Even if the goal is to transform these structures and practices, the “genius” architect is bound to apply her thinking to the issues of her time and with the resources of the society and discipline to which she belongs.

Simmel’s assertions concerning the persistence with which individual freedom must be pursued and the range of inquiry to which it is limited suggest a constraint on autonomous action. But alone they do little to challenge the notion that innovation arises within the mind of the individual. Then again, for Simmel the choice to be indifferent is inherently a political act:

To a great extent, freedom consists in a process of liberation; it rises above a bond, contrasts with a bond; it finds its meaning, consciousness, and value only as a reaction to it. But it no less consists in a power relation to others, in the possibility of making oneself count within a given relationship, in the obligation or submission of others, in which alone it finds its value and application. The significance of freedom as something limited to the subject himself, thus, appears as the watershed between its two social functions, as it were; and they are based on the simple fact that the individual is tied by others and to others. The subjective significance of freedom hence approximates zero, but it reveals its real significance in this twofold sociological relation, even where freedom is conceived as an individual quality.²⁰

Once we recognize that the claim of autonomy, however sincere, is a move to gain or maintain power, the subjectivity that this position purports to entail is in jeopardy. Even though a political act may play outside the rules and challenge the constraints of given social institutions and practices, this challenge must at least be comprehensible or translatable in order for the power relation – “making oneself count” – to work. In other words, the exercise of freedom is bound to the ontological assumptions of the political field of which it is part. These ontological assumptions, to which we will return often, are comprised of an *a priori* set of structures and social practices, a particular construct of space and time.

¹⁹ Simmel, “Soziologie: Untersuchungen” p 121.

²⁰ Ibid., p 122.

It may seem that Simmel's excursion has led us back to the other end of the spectrum of historical explanation: to social, economic, and technological determinisms. Innovation necessarily involves a shift in our ontological assumptions, however slight. But if an individual architect acting "autonomously" is in reality inescapably constrained by a particular conception of time and space, then it would seem that some structural system must be handing-down these shifts in ontology from above, instead. Fortunately, Simmel's concept of sociation suggests a way out of this riddle.

The argument which will occupy the remainder of this paper is for an interactionist methodology for the history and criticism of architecture, which will sublimate the dualism suggested by the individualist and determinist models of historical explanation outlined above. The theory rests on a distinction between constraints imposed on the individual by fully-formed society and the constraints imposed by the process of interaction itself – a distinction between socialization and sociation.

If innovation carries with it a change in ontological assumptions, it follows that innovations emerge only in such circumstances where a renegotiation of ontology is possible. Simmel's concept of sociation is the coming-to-agreement about the context of a relationship, the process through which social roles are conferred, or simply the negotiation and construction of ontology. It is the creation of a reality for a concrete, particular social interaction; an ever-so-slight twist on the understanding of things as they are. If we imagine a fluid concept of ontology, we can see how such subtle shifts in the way individuals interpret the nature of being take place even in the most banal and routine of human interactions. Ontology must be considered, not as a state, but as something continually created anew in the dynamic of human interaction.

Innovations are actually taking place all the time, and the more uncomplicated the social interaction, the greater the potential for a renegotiation of ontological assumptions. Indeed, Simmel argues that the simplest relation – the unmediated interaction of two individuals – is sociation itself:

[The dyad] itself is a sociation. Not only are many general forms of sociation realized in it in a very pure and characteristic fashion; what is more, the limitation to two members is a condition under which alone several forms of relationship exist.²¹

When Peter Blake condemns determinist explanations of "inspired" works like Ronchamps and Taliesen West, his criticism is directed specifically at theories that explain away human agency and creativity and suggest that what we label as such is merely the inevitable product (or happenstance byproduct) of social forces acting on individuals. Simmel's concept of sociation does not preclude such socialization: when a group or society exists irrespective of the individual members of the group, he suggests that norms and prescribed roles will likely determine much of the context for social transaction and relationship rather than a process of sociation. But while the circumstances for socialization exist and factor into human behavior, this type of relationship of the individual to

²¹ Ibid. It is worth noting that for Simmel, the dyadic relationship is a sort of *tabula rasa*. An interaction in which two people play roles (e.g. husband and wife) is not a dyadic interchange insofar as the interaction is being mediated by these prescribed social roles and norms (which, to varying degrees, it always is and always isn't). When we speak of the dyadic form, we speak of the ideal situation of interaction between individuals with no *a priori* roles.

the society, or the group, constitutes neither the whole of relations between the individual and the group, nor the whole of social relations in general:

[T]he difference between the dyad and larger groups consists in the fact that the dyad has a different relationship to each of its two elements than have larger groups to *their* members. Although, for the outsider, the group consisting of two may function as an autonomous, super-individual unit, it usually does not do so for its participants. Rather, each of the two feels himself confronted only by the other, not by a collectivity above him. The social structure here rests immediately on the other of the two, and the secession of either would destroy the whole. The dyad, therefore, does not attain that super-personal life which the individual feels to be independent of himself. As soon, however, as there is a sociation of three, a group continues to exist even in the case one of the members drops out.²²

Precisely because there is no *a priori* imposed by the group or by society on which one individual in the dyadic relationship might draw for legitimacy, he cannot dictate the content of the social interaction. Thus, Simmel holds the dyad apart as a unique form of relationship in that its content and structure are fully coincidental: “[the dyad] itself is a sociation.”²³

The following sections of our essay will address how the process of sociation in which new ontologies are constructed applies to innovation within a discourse, and more specifically within the discourse of architecture? Innovation consists not simply in solving an existing problem, but in reframing the problem along with its solution; the issues that an innovative, new architecture is designed to address come into existence only in the process of the architect or architects “solving” them. The ontological presuppositions and the innovation are simultaneous inventions. This invention does not transpire in the mind of the solitary architect toiling at the drafting table, however, but in series of negotiations and transactions across professional and personal social networks. Sociation is interindividual process.

¶ 1.2 CURRENCIES

In an interactionist model of history, the moment of sociation is the unit of analysis. But the question of how, precisely, changes in the ontological assumptions are wrought demands a closer examination of the facilities of communication through which innovations are negotiated between individuals. If the form of exchange Simmel calls “sociation” allows for innovation – something beyond what any of the parties to the transaction are bringing to the table – what must the form and nature of the currency of this exchange be? Innovations are communicated and constructed within the context of the language²⁴ used to describe them, and a brief exploration of the concept of *currency* in general, and of language in particular, will illuminate the mechanics of sociation. Simmel’s account of the emergence of exchange from the condition of interindividual life frames our discussion.

²² Ibid., p 123.

²³ Emphasis added.

²⁴ By “language” we intend, of course, the fluid concept of the functional role of language as a common currency of communication. We do not mean “languages” such as French, German, English, etc. for which the word “language” is but a convenient label.

There may be doubt that these socially legislated rates which govern trade in all undeveloped cultures could only have resulted from numerous previous transactions which initially took place in irregular and unfixed form among individuals. This objection holds for exchange, however, no more than it does for language, custom, law, religion – in short, for all the fundamental forms of life which emerge from and regulate the group as a whole. For a long time these forms, too, could only be explained as the inventions of individuals, whereas they surely arose from the very beginning as interindividual formations, as the product of interaction between individual and collectivity, so that no individual is to be credited with their origin...

From all the following it appears that exchange is a sociological structure *sui generis*, a primary form and function of interindividual life. By no means does it follow logically from those qualitative and quantitative properties of things which we call utility and scarcity. On the contrary, both these properties derive their significance as generators of value only under the presupposition of exchange. Where exchange, offering a sacrifice for the sake of a gain, is impossible for any reason, no degree of scarcity of a desired object can convert it to an economic value until the possibility of that relation reappears.²⁵

Consider the concrete case of a monetary system – the Guinea, for instance. The Guinea is a literal, material currency; it can be exchanged for other material things. The Guinea is at the same time a figurative currency for communicating value. Simmel's insight allows us to decouple these two functions of currency and recognize that cultural values and meanings become tied to a currency only through practice and habit – only under conditions where exchange is possible. The conflation of a currency with an ontological or cultural frame of reference occurs in the use and negotiation of the transaction – in the interaction – under the presupposition of exchange. The ontology is not a property of the currency itself.

What Simmel does in this text is to deconstruct the issue of whether a currency – the Guinea – is a cultural system or a universal one. His finding that a multiplicity of diverse, cultural meanings may be attached to a currency through transaction excludes the former possibility, but Simmel also rejects the latter. Currency is not a universal form; it becomes real in history as a product of social interaction. The currency in which interindividual life takes place is not a value or necessity in itself, but a facility through which value is constructed and negotiated.

In this light, consider how an innovation might be constructed and communicated through the currency of language. The process consists in decoupling the neutral currency (read: language) from the ontological, cultural meanings with which the language has been conflated, whereupon the currency is a *tabula rasa* that can be employed in the service of innovative ideas.

To illustrate, in *Nationalism and Social Communication* Karl Deutsch describes a peculiar tension between language and identity: that while language makes the communication of identity possible, both are in a state of perpetual flux. On the one hand, language appears to serve as an ontological frame of reference through which the world is interpreted: French identity is clinched by the particular logic of “French” language. On the other hand, identity is being debated

²⁵ Simmel, “Exchange,” pp 66–8.

and reformulated *ad infinitum*, and language adjusts to its changing demands. Social relations shape language as much as the converse.

Deutsch asserts that language is a facility that first emerges from a need to communicate interpretations of the world. Identity is the antecedent of language; indeed, it is what makes communication through language desirable:

This job consists in the storage, recall, transmission, recombination, and reapplication of relatively wide ranges of information; and the “equipment” consists in such learned memories, symbols, habits, operating preferences, and facilities as will in fact be sufficiently complementary to permit the performance of these functions. *A larger group of persons linked by such complementary habits and facilities of communication we may call a people.*²⁶

This concept, that languages are habits learned in the interactive process of attempting to communicate identity, suggests that language, far from constraining possible interpretations of the world, is the currency through which new interpretations are continuously negotiated. While particular language usages come to be associated with particular identities, such relations between a particular currency and a particular ontology are tenuous. Sociation and innovation can occur in moments when the medium of language is decoupled from given ontological, cultural meanings, which in turn opens up the language to innovative constructs of space and time.

¶ 1.3 GRAMMAR AND GRAMMATICAL CHANGE

Underneath Karl Deutsch’s paradigm is a distinction between the respective roles of lexicon and grammar in the negotiation of innovative ideas. If the function of lexicon is to name, to specify, to classify, and to systematize, the role of grammar is to suggest the relations between the things specified by lexicon. Lexicons signify things while grammars *encompass* relationships. The most rudimentary gesture, pointing to an object, is grammatical usage.

This functional relation between language and reality is not merely an analogy: a material correlation exists between the mode of signification and the concepts it can convey. The meanings that one can transmit through lexicon (nouns, verbs, and their modifiers) denote actual institutions and practices. Conversely, the meanings one can communicate by various grammatical forms (transitivity, ergativity, etc.) circumscribe real relationships. That is, when the distinction a speaker intends to transmit concerns the *relations* between things, the discretionary aspect of language that is at stake will be *grammatical*.

Deutsch suggests that grammatical usage can be operationalized. “Actual acts” of communication that engender a given ontological consciousness “consist of specific physical processes and [can] be tested by specific operations.”²⁷ In the same way that jargons develop, grammatical usage will adapt to the structure of relations within a discourse. In architecture, for instance, as an architect bends his mind around a new concept (one which transforms his understanding of the relationship between people and their environment), he simultaneously bends his use or understanding of language to accommodate and articulate the innovative idea. All the while, the possibilities and limitations of language at the given moment in time, i.e., of his particular audience’s ability to translate what is being said, constrain the ways in which the new phenomena can be constructed.

²⁶ Deutsch, p 70.

²⁷ Ibid., p 81.

Grammatical change, which we liken to innovation or a shift in the ontological assumptions, is an improvisation. As an architect grapples *in the moment* with trying to render a new thought intelligible to others, he selects and foregrounds particular elements of the grammar that is available to him.²⁸ Both speaker and audience engage in this interactive process of recombining and shading available grammatical forms to approximate the new relationship. But by the time the architect and his colleagues arrive at an appropriate grammar that strikes a chord with them – by the time they come to an agreement on a new ontological construct in which they can collectively comprehend or translate the new idea – the innovation is no longer the figment that existed in the mind of the architect. It is a product of sociation.

The innovation consists in this process of coming to understand only in the course of trying to make oneself understood. Social construction, as I employ the concept, is not the notion that a social order pre-exists and begets the ideologies, ontologies, and architectures that govern it, but rather that ideologies are born in the concrete action-reaction of propositional speech. A new idea is not embedded within the language of any one individual's statement. The innovation is bodied forth in the speech act, in that immediate interaction of proposition and response. Architecture is the product, not of society, nor of the solitary thinker, but of the social encounter.

The Enigma of Universalism

The aim of universalist projects – that of modern architecture among them – has been to arrive at an ideal system or metric by which scientific knowledge can be classified. In the linguistic terms illustrated above, the design of this metric is tantamount to arriving at a lexicon that is both comprehensive and complete. The architectural historian Sigfried Giedion took the project up in turn with the publication of *Space, Time, and Architecture*.

The postmodern critique of the universalist project centers in on the arbitrariness with which one metric system is favored over another – one lexicon over another. To rescue the modern project from these accusations of egoism and salvage some aspect of the ideal, we argue that the project was confounded by an internal enigma – a veritable Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle – that the modernists did not anticipate.

The conundrum is revealed in the well-known nationalist project of L'Académie Française, which we will explore by way of illustration. The mandate of L'Académie Française (which has its corollaries in other countries, as well) is to curtail the flow of foreign words imported into the French language. Ironically, if its attempts to *fix* the French language were successful, the formation of the very French identity it has in mind to preserve would cease. After all, as we argued in the previous sections, the fluidity of language is what allows for the continuous negotiation of identity. We would be naïve to attribute such altruistic motivations to L'Académie Française, however. A dynamic French identity is not what the agency has in mind, but rather a particular, static identity that is tied up with the entity of the nation-state. To these ends, they appropriate neutral concepts within the language and bind them to a constructed national identity.

²⁸ “Appendix 2: A Note on the Grammar of Little Texts” in Halliday, p 372. The appendix inventories a small assortment of alternative English grammars. The “little texts” (newspaper headlines, classified advertisements, instructions, recipes, bulleted lists, and etc.) are extraordinary circumstances where minimizing the number of words takes precedence over traditional grammar.

Karl Deutsch explains, “national consciousness... is the attachment of secondary symbols of nationality to primary items of information moving through channels of social communication, or through the mind of an individual. Not wit, but ‘French wit,’ and etcetera.”²⁹

Pierre Taminiaux suggests that the ideal of the nation-state is intrinsically contradictory in that it “implies a collective contract while at the same time promoting and encouraging an ethical individualism stemming from the general philosophy of the enlightenment.”³⁰ The nation-state itself must find a way to mediate the incongruity. For this reason, the measures of the French authorities to guard their language cannot be dismissed as Luddite, even if the manifest function of L’Académie Française to stop the evolution of the French language is futile, because, after all, it would by extension necessitate a stop to the evolution of French identity altogether. These measures play an important part in constructing the historical reality and validity of a people or a nation-state called France. Whereas the attempt to define and enforce an “authentic” French language cannot but fail, the nationalistic end to unify the people behind France succeeds. In this respect, the campaign of L’Académie Française is a trick; it is rhetoric about *national* rhetoric. Irrespective of its success in terms of actually preserving a French lexicon, if a people can be convinced of the value of such an endeavor, then they have also unwittingly accepted the ontology which reproduces the nation-state called France.

Let us consider this same illustration in more abstract terms. There is a set of social relations, practices, and ontological assumptions called the nation-state. Those whose interests are being served by the arrangement attempt to reproduce the particular set of relations and practices by controlling the way people talk. And though dictating speech and identity formation in this manner is an impossibility, the universalist project of perfecting the language nonetheless appeals to people’s egos.

The conundrum is plain to see, that the perfection of the lexicon requires the cessation of the interindividual processes of sociation by which grammar and lexicon will invariably evolve and change. In order for the “perfect” French language to remain so, French identity must not continue to evolve. Such a suspension of social process, as the case of L’Académie Française illustrates, is nonsensical in reality and fruitless analytically.

What L’Académie Française attempted (perhaps disingenuously) on behalf of the nation-state with language, Sigfried Giedion – or more precisely, the architects he pays tribute to – attempted (more naively) to do on behalf of the practice of architecture with architectural vocabulary and architectural form. What these modern architects failed to anticipate was the evolution of the patterns of social and professional relations over which their ideas and buildings would be propagated, evaluated, and renegotiated.

Relativism

The postmodern, relativist account of the failure of the modern project to arrive at a universal metric is that metrics are always relative with respect to the cultures from which they derive. Even when one metric consumes the alternatives, the mere fact of the hegemony of the system is not tantamount to its superlative value with respect to other systems. The postmodern critique rightly questions

²⁹ Deutsch, p 146.

³⁰ Taminiaux, p 91.

the normative preference of one lexical system over another, but a logical gap remains between this critique and the relativist notion that there is a field of lexical systems and no basis for discrimination among them. A lexical system can only be perfected insofar as the ontological assumptions on which it is based are held constant. The pressing issue for the modernist project is, therefore, not to perfect the lexicon once-and-for-all, but rather for the current state of social relations.

Since in point of fact minute changes in ontology are continually being wrought as miniature innovations are exchanged and negotiated across broad networks of actors (or even in the most banal of human interactions), the teleological aspirations of modernism are confounded. What remains of the modern project is not a fixed lexicon, but first, a continuous re-evaluation of the correspondence between lexicon and grammar, and secondly, the command of the processes by which both are produced through sociation. The *universal* are the practices of *Vergesellschaftung* – sociation itself – which govern the evolution of relations between individuals. The role of universalism, then, is not to arrive at the end of history, but rather to continually flesh-out and re-assess the ideal for the present as if the relations and practices of the present will extend into the future.

Multivocality

Hannes Meyer believed that “the structure and the vital needs” of society were tractable and that the means by which the discipline of architecture would organize to fulfill those needs were at hand. For him, the *relevance* of architecture was simply the apropos application of the creativity of designers in collaboration with economists, sociologists, etc. to these clear-cut economic, social, material problems. In the intervening half-century, however, the methodologies of these other disciplines failed to meet the challenge that Meyer’s optimistic manifesto presented. Sociological explanations of social structure relied on *a priori* categorizations in the mind of the sociologist, which while they may have come to be present in the consciousness of society, did not capture social structure *de facto*. Insofar as the discipline of sociology reasoned interindividual life and sociation to be the constituents of social structure, these processes were set aside in favor of more tractable alternatives when social structure was operationalized. The difficulty of extricating the process of sociation from the particularistic contents that it entailed proved a more involved endeavor than sociologists cared to undertake.

But since we propose that the Simmelian moment of sociation is the basis for both the theorization of *relevance* and for a new practice of architectural criticism and history, this gap between theory and methodology – between sociation and tractable structure – must be closed.

¶ II.1 NETWORKS

In their paper *Social Structure from Multiple Networks*, White et al. argue that “categorical aggregates” and cross-tabulations of individuals’ attributes (e.g. “lower-middle-class white Protestants who live in inner city areas and vote Democrat”)³¹ are insufficient proxies for structural positions. In place of these methodologies,

31 White, et al., “Multiple Networks,” p 733.

they propose a model in which aggregation is accomplished by abstracting concrete social ties or relations among the actors in a social system or participants to a discourse. This data is then arrayed into matrices and sorted into blocks, which indicate the patterns of ties and holes among sets of actors in a social network. The “blockmodel” not only breaks the network down into structurally equivalent sets of actors, but points to the positions of these sets of actors relative to one another.³² This pattern of positions is a pragmatic, social constraint on the diffusion of ideas and innovations over a network of participants to a discourse.

As part of their investigation, White, et al. followed the social formation of a new fraternity chapter over the first fifteen weeks of its existence, charting the incidence of various relational ties among its members and abstracting this data into mathematical arrays – or blockmodels. They discovered that while the individual preferences expressed by the fraternity members remained in flux for the duration of the study, by the fifth week the young men had unwittingly settled into a particular, underlying pattern of positions: a concrete social structure.³³ So while a framework emerged from an unstructured “first few weeks of maneuvering” – a framework which then began to structure the fraternity members’ subsequent interactions – this network structure never correlated with the specific contents of those interactions.

The stabilization of the pattern of positions, density, and centrality of the network amounts to settling in on a general ontological framework, which then serves as a foundation for interactions among the network of participants to the discourse. The negotiation and implementation of this ontology across the network of actors are concomitant processes. Innovations occur when disjunctures in the discourse induce the realignment of this network structure: when the repercussive effects of miniature innovations and renegotiations of ontology between positions in the discourse are compounded and diffused through the network, or when the multivocal action of some participants to the discourse compels the simultaneous renegotiation of terms among many positions at once. Structure cannot be construed from content – i.e., from pinning down the specific meanings of ideas and “innovations” being exchanged in a discourse – but rather must be deduced from the pattern of relations or ties among the network of participants to the discourse.

¶ 11.2 LOCAL ACTION

At Columbia University’s *Evolve New York Open Studio Conference* in the Spring of 2002, panelist and historian Mark Jarzombek challenged Peter Eisenman, whose students’ design work was being exhibited, over the matter that Eisenman’s interests had of late taken a surprising “classical turn.” Eisenman, countered that the discourse of architecture in the twentieth century had wandered fruitlessly from models of space and material into themes of philosophy, psychology, and sociology; in the sense that both his built works as well as his pedagogy converged explicitly on the play of objects and spaces, they had in fact always been classical.³⁴ While Jarzombek had hoped to provoke his colleague with the word “classical,” Eisenman refused to engage with the unequivocal question – of

³² Ibid., p 739. The sorting is done with mathematical algorithms in contrast with the anthropological groupings with which the authors compare their findings later in the article.

³³ Ibid., pp 763–765.

³⁴ “Evolve New York Open Studio: Rebuilding Proposals” Conference, 10. May 2002 at Columbia University.

whether his theories and practice of architecture had changed – by refusing to concede Jarzombek’s implicit claim of authority over the meaning of “classical.”

The specific content of Eisenman’s statement was of little value to a substantive exploration of the issues at hand, at least as Jarzombek had framed them. After all, if Jarzombek had been hoping for a debate, he could do little but agree with the generalities with which Eisenman characterized the normative concerns of classicism and his own œuvre. Yet while Eisenman’s was not the decisive, inspired claim one might expect of an accomplished theorist and practitioner, his action nonetheless obliged a different relationship or role structure between himself and Jarzombek; i.e., a different ontology in which to understand the relationship between classicism and contemporary ideas about architecture. And as a byproduct of opening up this possibility for an innovation of ontology, Eisenman effectively reproduced his own legitimacy and centrality within the broader discourse of architecture.

In *Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici, 1400–1434*, authors Padgett and Ansel contend with the Machiavellian notion that control begets control, that power is reproduced by the prudent and decisive exercise of authority by the sovereign, i.e., by the genius. They propose instead that authority and legitimacy are preserved through ambiguous, non-directed actions that keep the authority figure at the center of discourse without making definitive claims that would be susceptible to challenge. These robust, multivocal actions allow for different translations by the various participants to the discourse, engaging each in a way that seems apropos of their own interests.³⁵ Such action is necessary, Padgett and Ansel argue, because legitimacy must be conferred upon the authority figure, not only claimed by him. This concept of multivocality begins to shed light on our anecdote: Eisenman’s authority is reproduced precisely because he steers clear of making any definitive, contentious claim with regard to the content of the issues at hand.

Before we move to the implication of Eisenman’s actions for the broader context of architectural discourse, consider the dynamic between Eisenman and Jarzombek in isolation. The foundation for Padgett and Ansel’s concept of multivocality is Eric Leifer’s model of exploratory action. While the paradigms of individualism and rational choice would suggest that individuals in social situations pursue their own ends, take decisive actions following from rational deductions, and claim the social roles to which they aspire, Leifer points to an Achilles’ heel in this strategy. In any social interaction or relationship, a role can be claimed by one participant only if the legitimacy of that claim is recognized by the other. Without the guarantee that the role will be conferred by the other participant, a claim on a particular role structure can be turned on its head – much as Eisenman rebuffed Jarzombek’s implicit claim on the meaning of classicism.

In the end, rational choice does not supply a theory for balanced reciprocity between participants in a relationship; indeed, if we follow the hypothesis of individual, rational choice to its logical end, we arrive at the volatile situation in which roles are never conferred, and claims to legitimacy and authority are never honored. Leifer demonstrates that in social interactions, the act of committing to a strategy – indeed, of revealing particular, coveted interests or ends – leaves the relationship susceptible to this unrelenting pattern of one-upmanship. In place of the rational choice paradigm, he proposes the theory of exploratory “local action,” in which an action is calculated only to elicit further interaction

35 Padgett and Ansel, p 1263.

from the other participant: “Local action neither secures coveted roles nor constrains future action.”³⁶ All the exchange accomplishes is the perpetuation of the negotiation of terms. The normative goal of local action is simply to give the other participant the opportunity to confer a role or reveal a strategy without claiming a role or committing to a strategy oneself.

Fundamentally, attaining a role structure in a relationship is tantamount to arriving at a consensus about the ontology that will frame the exchange of content: “roles are not ‘givens’ that constrain interaction, but are something that actors must acquire through interaction.”³⁷ The immediate aim of local action is but the deferral of such consensus: the maintenance of a *tabula rasa* between the participants with regard to their roles in the interaction. And until roles are conferred, i.e., until an ontological framework for structuring the exchange of information has been settled upon, the meaning of the specific contents exchanged between the participants will remain ambiguous.³⁸ Innovation occurs in these moments of the suspension of ontology, when the medium of language is decoupled from its meaning. Clearly, deconstructing the content of actions and statements is inadequate. To understand the substance and import of an innovation, we must understand the specific, interindividual processes by which an ontology is constructed.

Multivocal Action

The heuristic of local action mediates the paradox of political action that is not goal directed. While those hoping for a concrete self-interpretation of Peter Eisenman’s work may have been left wanting, Eisenman nevertheless engaged his audience and ultimately furthered his own agenda by allowing each listener to interact with and interpret his statements on their own terms. At the same time that Eisenman categorically refused the legitimacy of Mark Jarzombek’s claim on classicism, his statements were consistent with Leifer’s model of exploratory local action with respect to the other historians and professionals present at the conference.

Political acts are rarely for the benefit of just one other participant to the interaction: an action or act-of-speech does not occur in the relative isolation of a relationship between just two individuals, but in an arena with many potential listeners and respondents. Robust, multivocal action is the extension of Leifer’s paradigm to the more pertinent circumstance [to our argument about architectural discourse] in which actions and speech are public or are made public. The individual must not only consider the implication of her action for the immediate interaction with the person whom she is addressing directly, but the compound effect that the realignment of that one relationship will have on an array of other relationships. The action must accomplish the outcomes of local action not for one, but for a multitude of recipients, each of who may translate the action differently.

Since it is “[c]rucial for maintaining discretion,” Padgett and Ansel point out, “not to pursue any specific goals,”³⁹ the abstract interests of the individual are

³⁶ Leifer, p 869.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p 865.

³⁸ It is imperative for the understanding of Leifer’s theory – as well as for Simmel’s relational sociology more generally – that we appreciate that the *tabula rasa* does not describe [only] the beginning of a new relationship, but any point of crisis – or innovation – in a relationship that demands a renegotiation of [at least some of] the terms of interaction.

³⁹ Padgett and Ansel, p 1264.

furthered instead by the importance accredited to her position in the discourse – in essence, by the fact that many and many important participants to the discourse interact with her and continue to do so. This structural position is the net effect of robust, multivocal action, as the position of Peter Eisenman in the contemporary discourse of architecture aptly illustrates. While Eisenman’s rarefied theories of architecture and space are marginal to the everyday practice of architecture, contemporary theorists and historians heed and contend with them precisely because of the ambiguities and disjunctures between what, in their respective interpretations, he seems to be saying and what he seems to be building.

In the public exchange with Eisenman, Jarzombek’s challenge takes a particular ontological framework – a particular role structure – for granted. Eisenman side-steps the issue of structure altogether; indeed, his claims about classicism are so indistinct as to be incontrovertible. But at the same time, Eisenman reproduces his position in the discourse as one through whom theories about classicism – or rather, theories about architecture more generally – must pass. He centers himself as the locus of discussion, not only with Jarzombek, but with all the different stances in the field concerning the roles of philosophy, psychology, and sociology vis-à-vis objects and spaces. The role of authority is conferred upon him concomitantly with the ambiguous, non-directed actions by which he is able to maintain a particular structural position in the network of participants to the discourse of architecture.⁴⁰

Turning Multivocality on End

If our anecdote is typical, Peter Eisenman’s success in compelling others in the direction of his agenda is not realized by convincing them of his lines of reasoning and the specific contents of his theories, but rather – in the terms of Star and Greisemer – by granting them the latitude to translate the agenda into their own logics.⁴¹ Notwithstanding the rejection of Jarzombek’s particular classicism, there is a concession to Jarzombek (and to the other participants to the discussion) in Eisenman’s assenting to the use of the term “classical” to describe his work. Eisenman allows his œuvre to be justified under the rubric of classicism, but paints classicism in such broad strokes that neither the advocate nor the adversary of classicism would find the comparison objectionable.

In the case of Leifer’s local action, the individual adopts no specific strategy to her desired ends, but *interest* is nonetheless still located *with the ego*; i.e., the object of her actions is ultimately the conferral of a coveted role. The same holds for the model of robust, multivocal action outlined above: the agenda, ultimately, is Peter Eisenman’s. But we might well flip this paradigm on end.

The locus of *interest* could well be distributed among the various listeners and respondents to robust action. Consider again Padgett and Ansel’s test case in light of Thomas’ theorem.⁴² The job of a Cosimo de Medici would be to preserve the illusion that, whether friend or foe, the success of any individual’s own project is contingent on the consent and corroboration of Cosimo de Medici. This differs from local action in that the sought after endpoint of Leifer’s paradigm is the conferral of roles. When the model is expanded to an arena of listeners and respondents – to a discourse – the perpetuation of the indeterminate state

⁴⁰ Position in a network corresponds with White, et al.’s use of the term, p 769, and the methodology provided for in *Social Structure from Multiple Networks* makes the diagramming of network structure and positions in a network tractable.

⁴¹ Star and Greisemer, p 404.

⁴² “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”

may be preferable to the conferral of clear role structures. Cosimo is able to extract rents from the various private agendas that others feel compelled to run by him, and his perceived reticence, ambivalence, and inconsistency – to which first-hand accounts proffered by his aides attest⁴³ – serve the purpose of reproducing his fortunate structural position. He does not reveal his strategy to the other players in the network of Florentine politics precisely because *he has no specific interests* other than to maintain the guise of being central to the success of role claims made by others in the discourse. If in the former paradigm of robust, multivocal action the sovereign – or genius – allows her agenda to be translated into multiple logics, in our latter paradigm, the various and multiple agendas of other participants to the discourse are funneled through the logic of the sovereign. The specific contents or ends of these political agendas need not align with some wider ideological objective of the sovereign; indeed, her interests are served and her control preserved simply as a byproduct of others' pursuit of their own private interests, by the credit she obtains from them.

¶ II.3 INCIDENTAL DEMOCRACY (THE OBJECTIVE THEORY OF RELEVANCE)

We suggest that this second paradigm is not a different interpretation of robust, multivocal action, but rather a different mode of multivocality. Moreover, the value of this mode is not in its implications for the sovereign herself, but for her subjects whose private agendas are obliquely served. Because the agenda is no longer located within the mind of the sovereign – i.e., within the genius theorist or genius architect – the offshoot of this mode of multivocality is an incidental democracy.

The objective theory of *relevance* is an inversion of the ideals of humanism or democratization, of concern for the *vita activa* and the perfection of subjective life. Consider again the discourse of the modern architects with whom we began our essay. The incidence of these ideals *de facto* was not the positive outcome of the constructive efforts of these modernists to collectively propagate humanist, democratic ideologies. Rather, they were the byproduct – the negative corollary – of a particular coincidence of a structure of discourse and the mode of multivocality concurrently adopted by the participants to that discourse. While the discourse of modernity in architecture was a contentious field of disparate ideological stances, its collective front with respect to the neighboring disciplines of art, education, politics, and industry as well as to the public at large was to corner the market on defining the material possibilities of modern man. This logic of material production and design became a funnel through which the respective agendas of its public and private clienteles – of the state, of industry, of unions and entrepreneurs and activists, of both socialists and capitalists – would pass.⁴⁴ A dictum like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's "less is more" does not entail any particular ideological agenda, but rather sets a standard to which others' agendas are to be held and compared.

The particular network structure, density, and interconnections with adjacent disciplines are a fertile seedbed for the *relevance* of discourse. But these must fall

⁴³ Padgett and Ansel, pp 1262–3.

⁴⁴ One of the great conundrums for any history of modern architecture is the ease with which European socialists before the Second World War and American capitalists after are equally able to co-opt International Style modernism – indeed the very same architects and manifestos – for their respective agendas, not to mention the ambiguity of the ideological position of those architects, like Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who led the discourse under both paradigms. But this outcome is predicted by the objective theory of *relevance*.

together with a mode of robust action in which the locus of interest is distributed among the constituents and respondents to the discourse. The human condition is served by the discipline of architecture in the paradoxical situation when the practitioners, theorists, and historians participating in and leading the discourse belie their normative interests and democratic ideologies with non-directed action that serves to reproduce their structural position.

THE CHALLENGE FOR HISTORIANS, CRITICS, AND PRACTITIONERS ALIKE IS TO account for the historical conditions that produced this pattern of relations among modern architects and with their colleagues in other disciplines, to account for the embrace of this mode of multivocal action, and to account for how the collaboration of structure and action made for the success of modernism in terms of the *relevance* of the discourse it produced – however imperfect.

Artifact and Storage

¶ III.1 IDEOLOGY & CONTROL IN THE FARNSWORTH HOUSE

A conventional window frames a view like a painting. And while the view may change as one moves past the window, the composition of the images seen through the glass is nonetheless modulated by the designer's choices – of the window's location, size, proportion, tint, angle, and frame. With so a simple gesture, the architect or builder places the occupant of an architectural space in a particular, chosen relationship to the outside world.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's house for Dr. Edith Farnsworth rejects the notion that an architecture should specify the occupant's relationship to the space she occupies. With this in mind, he chose not to design a house, but rather to cut a slice out of continuous space. The house is simply a ground plane and a ceiling plane. These abstract, infinite planes demarcate a space for unconstrained motion, a perpetual *tabula rasa* in which actors perform their chosen dramas in time. The divisions between spaces are made with furniture rather than walls. And of course, in lieu of framed windows, the space is wrapped in glass. In these ways, the architect releases the inhabitant from his control, from any subjective or propagandistic aims. He engages in an "economy, purity, and intensity" which are not to be found in the *Beaux Arts* tradition.⁴⁵

Consider these floor to ceiling, corner to corner glass walls which define the interior space of the house. Is it a fishbowl? A museum installation putting modern life on display? An adulation of voyeurism?⁴⁶ The transparency of the building has a twofold intention: it not only pays tribute to the processes of rational living, but it likewise liberates the inhabitant. The glass walls of the Farnsworth house eliminate the normative issue of how the designer should modulate the view, proposing instead that this should be subject to the personal freedom and ethical responsibility of the individual inhabitant.⁴⁷ Mies van der Rohe's asser-

⁴⁵ Ford, p 25.

⁴⁶ Mies van der Rohe's student, Philip Johnson – designer of another well-known glass house in New Caanan, Connecticut – readily acknowledges the voyeurism that the glass house invites. When asked by a guest how he preserves his modesty in his glass house when he goes to bed, Johnson retorted: "Madam, I did not ask you to spend the night!"

⁴⁷ This is not unlike the logic behind André Bazin's "deep focus" in cinematography. That this concern over windows is not as inconsequential as it may seem is evidenced by the

tion is that by these means the architect relinquishes his deterministic control over the experience of the space. The changes in the landscape perceived by the inhabitant are no longer those artificially constructed and filtered by the architect, but the slow, natural processes of change that occur with the seasons and the passage of time.

The oft-quoted proposition that “less is more” was never intended as a tagline for the minimalist style or aesthetic. Rather, Mies van der Rohe was making plain the ethical function of architecture: the *less* the designer imposes a hegemonic structure on the lives of the occupants of his buildings, the *more* those occupants will be free to make their own ethical choices. Along with Johnson’s house in New Caanan, the Farnsworth house is one of the most salient manifestations of the theory of *universal space* applied to the design of a residential building. Belying *a priori* uses or representational meanings, the space allows the occupant to fill in what formerly a designer would have determined. Dispensing with the dogma of representation, Mies van der Rohe follows the general principles of modern architecture later conceptualized by Edward Ford: the doctrine of material efficiency, the doctrine that structure and architecture are one-and-the-same, the doctrine of transparency, and the doctrine of monolithic construction.⁴⁸

But do these doctrines as realized in the design of the Farnsworth house free the space from the control that had typified the conventional practice of architecture? We contend that they do not; rather, that the house exerts the same tight jurisdiction over the personal practices and effects of the inhabitant as did the contrived processions of *Beaux Arts* design. Implicit in the rational rules by which the house was designed is a construct of the categories of space and time: a rational, Taylorist logic or standard for modern living. After all, the slice of space that Mies chose is not arbitrary, but defined by parallel planes subdivided by a consciously scored grid. The regularity of the 2'-9" by 2'-0" grid over which the rectilinear plan was laid out orchestrates and constrains the possible actions and possible interpretations of actions that take place in the space. The consequences are not merely psychological – the effects of life in a panopticon. Indeed, they are also material. The regular order of the design, though not representational, nonetheless begets an order of practice. The guest cannot turn the chair off axis, leave his house shoes on the floor, or draw the curtains just so without those actions having a particular meaning with respect to the order of the design of which they are trying to be independent. There are two mechanisms of control present in the building, one which the modern architect consciously tries to eliminate and another which he fails to elude.

Objects in a Discourse

To further elucidate these two mechanisms by which an object exerts control on both those who encounter it and those who created it, let us consider a simpler case: of the hotel keychain, on which anthropologist Bruno Latour has already elaborated.⁴⁹

The seasoned hotel manager, Latour tell us, realizes that room keys that

allegations waged by New Urbanists in contemporary pop-architectural discourse. James Howard Kunstler writes that opposed to the “dignified condition” that traditional windows signify, the “[h]orizontal windows [widely used in modernist architecture] frame the human figure in a way that implies that the inhabitants are either sleeping, having sex, or dead. We don’t want to think about them that way.” pp 99–100.

⁴⁸ Ford, p 28.

⁴⁹ Latour, “Technology,” pp 104–5.

leave the building are more likely to be lost or stolen than those which are safeguarded by the concierge. The needless annoyance and expense of cutting new keys leads him to beg of his patron that she leave her keys at the reception desk when she ventures out. He discovers that his instructions are more consistently heeded once he posts a reminder by the door, and in the end, to win over even the most defiant or inattentive of guests, he attaches a large, heavy weight to each of the key chains.

The first two acts, the manager's verbal request and the posting of a sign, serve to remind the guest of the terms of her transaction with the hotel. It is neither the charisma of the manager nor the physicality of the sign that compel the guest to leave the key with the concierge, but rather the bureaucratic authority of the contractual relationship to which the manager and the sign point. And while depositing the key at the front desk – a minor detail in the conditions of the contract between the guest and the hotel – may over time become a cultural practice or institution of itself, the nature of the general relation of the hotel to the guest (and of the guest to her key) remains intact. The ontological assumptions under which the parties relate to one another are unaffected.

The third means by which the manager intends to manipulate his guest's behavior is of a different sort. The weighted key chain is not a signifier of the contractual relationship to which the guest is bound, and her reaction to the weight is not mediated by [that particular] social institution. Instead, by affixing a weight to the key, the manager is attempting to restructure the relationship of the guest to her key in such a way that her interests and his will neatly coincide. Rather than appealing to an outside authority, the manager anticipates that the immediate relationship with the physicality of the object – the weightiness itself – will produce the desired behavior. The key will be a burden for the guest to carry around – at least, this is what the manager hopes – and leaving it at the desk will be judged a convenience rather than a hassle.

In this scenario, two interdependent mechanisms of control are conflated into the object, and the task for understanding how these two attributes function is to separate them analytically. There is a subtle distinction between what the heavy key chain *means* (reflecting back on the will of the hotel manager) and what the key chain *does* (which is an intrinsic property of the size and weight of the keychain). The imparted *meaning* is to leave the key [alternately, that you have *the benefit* of leaving the key] at the reception desk when you venture outside. What the weighted key chain *does*, on the other hand, is simply *to be cumbersome*. The latter action of the keychain on the guest – the material relation – is immutable. The former relation, the meaning of the weight, far from being universal, is particular, cultural, and contingent on the presentation of the artifact (it is accompanied by verbal instructions and signs, it may eventually become a custom, etc).

Indeed, the precise meaning of attaching a weight to the keychain is subject to negotiation and can be understood only once the guest acts on the different material relationship she now has with her room key. While the manager's verbal request and the sign posted by the door carry with them the authority of an existing social institution, his decision to attach a weight to the keys imagines a different ontological condition, which is then worked through interactively with the guest. One might suppose, for instance, that the guest will not interpret the unwieldiness of the key chain as an inconvenience, but rather will find that its bulkiness helps her to better keep track of the key in her knapsack. In this case, the fact that the weight is cumbersome comes to have a different meaning for both

parties than what the manager had imagined. As the interaction between them develops, a new order of social relation and practice – a new ontology – emerges.

Consider this interaction in the linguistic terms we put forward in a previous section of our essay. Just as the meanings of lexical terms are clear when they are spoken within the framework of an established grammar, the meaning to which an object points is obvious when the object exists within the framework of an agreed-upon institutions and practices. (The significance of the sign posted by the door, for instance, is clear in light of the contractual relationship into which the guest has entered). When the existing grammar is ill suited to describe an emerging social relation between things, there is a period of interindividual improvisation through which a new grammar is worked out; i.e., an interactive process generates the ontological assumptions that will frame the new relation and give it a particular meaning. In our example, this improvisational exchange will yield a framework for determining what the cumbersomeness of the keychain means for the guest.

Given that we can differentiate between these two means by which an object can exert control in a social system – its *doing* and its *meaning* – the aspiration of Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, and more broadly of *universal space*, is an honorable one. The theory holds that a democratic architecture should be reduced to only the immutable of these two forms of control; that is to say, that control should be reduced to just what the object necessarily *does* by virtue of being an object. A building will inevitably shelter, enclose and, in certain respects, order the life of its occupant, but it should not impose any particular cultural *meaning* to that sheltering, enclosing, and ordering.

Here we have deviated from the model of the hotel room key. When the manager designs his key chain, he has a particular meaning and political goal in mind from the onset; it would be ridiculous to suppose that the weight of the key chain is an end unto itself.⁵⁰ The academic *Beaux Arts* and contemporary postmodern traditions of architecture concern themselves with exactly this correspondence: between the semiotics of form and corresponding political ends or meanings. Insofar as the architect and the client, occupant, or passerby (or whomever may justifiably have expectations for the building) share the semiotic system, subjective questions concerning the legibility, correctness, and suitability of the representation, whether there is “enough” room, or the degree to which the plan reflects the analogous form of social organization are legitimate questions. But there is a subtle duplicity in these questions: by shifting attention to the fitness of the form for the given political end, they preclude a critique of the political end itself. This blasé attitude toward critique obfuscates the normative interests behind the physical mechanisms of control. While the questions seem to pertain to the *relevance* of the architecture, the concern is not with the general cultivation of subjective life, but rather with the specific *relevance* of the building to particular ends and interests.

The intention behind the modernist model of *universal space*, conversely, is to purge design of the normative interests and political control of the designer and/or client, leaving only the immutable, material action of the object on the occupant. Rather than reproducing a social order, the theory suggests that a

⁵⁰ For heuristic purposes we portrayed the act of attaching a weight to the key as a proposition, suggesting that it does not point to an extant social practice to which the guest’s reaction is bound. If we were to consider the scenario more realistically, we would readily admit that contractual relations are not the only relevant social practice to our scenario. Certainly, the hotel manager would have good reason to believe that the weight will be interpreted as he intends it to be interpreted.

building should present a *tabula rasa* on which the occupants write their own drama. The task of the architect is not to assess and give form to the interests of the client, but instead to choose a set of material elements which, when arranged in a composition of her design, imply no content by themselves.

Clearly we have arrived at a paradox: that the success of such an endeavor – to create an object or work of architecture that points at nothing – can only be assessed from within the ontology under which the object or building is initially conceived. Material and formal elements and compositions, which may have implied no content at one point in time, later, under conditions of evolving social institutions and practices, do point to specific political ends. Insofar as the Farnsworth House realized the liberation of its occupants from this form of political control, the social conditions for that liberation have evolved out from under it in the intervening years since its construction. And indeed, when we previously criticized the building for failing to live up to its democratic ideals, we did so from the ontological point-of-view of the time of the writing of this essay. Just as L'Académie Française is powerless to impede the dynamism of identity formation and the corresponding transformation of language, the architect cannot call to a halt the evolution of the ontological assumptions of the society for which he builds.

The Conundrum of Universal Space

In his observations of the organizational structure of a New York City trading house, sociologist Daniel Beunza offers a concrete example of how – when production relations evolve beyond Taylorist economies of motion, communication and efficiency – the modernist notion of *universal space* can become a constraint.⁵¹ The trading room that Beunza studies occupies a floor of an anonymous New York skyscraper, and while its large, open plan is not a rigorous exemplar of the type, it follows from the paradigm of *universal space*. The layout of the space is not coupled to a specific organizational form; indeed, it is the sort of “dumb” space that a developer supposes will accommodate any type of office program.

One ideal of *universal space*, to allow for efficient movement and exchange of information and goods irrespective of the given organizational form, would seem to facilitate the trading floor manager's mandate to foster an atmosphere that will ultimately minimize the risk to the company as a whole. When traders interact with other traders and exchange ideas and theories about the current workings of the market, the probability of falling into hackneyed and counter-productive trading routines decreases. Nonetheless, Beunza notes, the physical ease of moving around and connecting with others has had no necessary effect to that end. Indeed, the manager laments that the various layouts with which he has experimented do little to mitigate the reserved and private behaviors of the traders, who will only talk, if at all, to those immediately adjacent to them.

Ironically, Beunza's observations support the democratic claims of *universal space*. Though the trading floor manager's objectives may arguably be in the common interest of everyone on the floor, the fact that he is unable to automatically organize the space for these normative, political ends is a testament to the architectural model. Moreover, the [lack of] exchange of information is, in point of fact, the self-determined choice of the traders on the floor.

But the social relations in the trading room are complicated – indeed fundamentally transformed – by the appearance of a new social actor: the robot. The

⁵¹ Beunza and Stark, “Organizations,” pp 14–16 and conversations with Daniel Beunza.

trading “robot” is simply a computer program [or the computer running it] that make instantaneous volume trades based on traders’ algorithms and a steady stream of real-time price data. The floor manager chooses the placement of these robots with an eye toward innovation: physically proximate robots tend to converge on similar algorithms when their respective programmers discuss strategies with one another, and this homogeneity increases the aggregate risk to the company. But herein lies a conundrum which confounds the ontological understanding of space and time specific to the modernist model of *universal space*. The modernist notion of efficiency would suggest that there is a physical organization – form – that best complements any given social or economic organization – function. In this case, however, one functional demand on the physical organization of the space is countermanded by another: the proximity of the traders and the ease of exchange concomitantly reduce the risk to the company in one respect and increase it in another.

How can *universal space* be unsustainable in any situation, much less one so paradigmatic of the capitalist culture of production? Confined as it is to Taylorist ontological assumptions, the only solution that the modernist architectural model can provide to this enigma is an imperfect equilibrium between the two competing demands. The functional flexibility provided for by *universal space* is contingent on Taylorist economies of motion, communication and efficiency, but these anachronistic understandings of what it means to occupy space are sublimated under the condition of evolving social institutions and practices. The logics of these economies do not anticipate the systems of innovation that are replacing classical, production-oriented models of organization, and so the architectural possibilities afforded by *universal space* do not accommodate the structural redundancies, heterarchies, and planned inefficiencies that are being integrated – deliberately or not – into contemporary organizational forms.

¶ III.2 UNIVERSALISM RECONSIDERED

Given that a building is bound to the ontology in which it is conceived, what can we salvage from the modern project of universalism in architecture? After all, the aim of this essay has not been to recapitulate the notions of universalization and explain away misguided efforts to their ends, but rather to question the level of remove at which such modern projects have been undertaken and then perhaps to propose a modern meta-project.

Having moved beyond the notion that buildings embody some representational, metaphorical meaning, the modernist project arrived at the primacy of function. But while the advanced modernist project of *universal space* attempted to sublimate the debates about what, normatively, the experience of buildings of various types should entail, it overlooked the fact that the category of function itself is constructed only through dialogue between the architecture and its occupant. The failure of *universal space* to anticipate contemporary organizational developments is not tantamount to the inadequacy of rational deduction to calculate the totality of functions for a space. Rather, it is the failure of its advocates and theorists to appreciate that occupants negotiate and renegotiate what it means to occupy space. Just as the meaning of the weight attached to the room key begins to emerge only once the guest responds to it, the architectural design of a space is merely a proposition. The meaning of a space is continuously worked out through interindividual process, i.e., through encounter and interaction with the architecture.

The role of a building in these dialogues – indeed, its role in the discourse

of architecture as a whole – is brought to bear through the bodily action of the design on the occupant. The ontological assumptions that structure the initial conception of an architectural design are preserved within the physical artifact of the building, and this anachronistic ontology becomes a form of control even when, as with Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, the intention is to undermine such determinism.

The universal project we propose consists in the recognition of an ongoing, interindividual construction of the categories of time and space – of *Vergesellschaftung*. The issue for architecture is not a conclusive answer to the question of what to design, but rather a continuous re-evaluation and critique of the correspondence between design and social practice and a search for an ideal as if the relations and practices of the present will extend into the future. The durable relation of form to the individual is neither representational nor ideological, but relational. And it is with this word that we hope to capture the role of objects or buildings on their occupants.

Architecture as a Proposition

Given our suggestion that the role or meaning of a building is a negotiation that takes place in the space between the designer, the inhabitant, and the material object itself, what is the significance of a physical building in a discourse, i.e., in the critical and historical discourses of architecture? We have proposed that the act of an architect formulating a theory and designing a building – placing it on view – is not of itself innovation, but rather a proposal for realigning a given construct of space and time. The innovation, the actual negotiation of the nature of that change, takes place in interindividual life. The act of architecture, then, is a proposition for change, but not an act that can specify how that change will take place. Innovation occurs in the coordinated response to the architectural object on display. The task for the history and criticism of architecture is to comprehend the structure of this coordinated response, and only then to reevaluate the competing claims of chameleon ideas within that structure.

Consider that the “art world”⁵² as a system of production requires the cooperative efforts of the artist, critic, and collector (and a plethora of others). But in fact, the converse is also true: the artist, critic, and collector are fully dependent on the joint venture called the “art world” for their independent existences. Yet while the relations between each of these functions in the social project we call art are symbiotic, there is no authoritative *modus operandi*. There is no firm or central governing body that coordinates the production of art in the “art world” and dictates the responsibility of each party. Nor are the artists, critics, and collectors even bound to one another in any legal, contractual sense; we have been fast-and-loose describing it as a joint venture. The organization is neither hierarchical nor does it function as the product of market transactions – indeed, the parties do not even share a common currency of value with respect to the art object.

Nevertheless, the “art world” is a coordinated system of production. The coordinating principle of the system is the object – the work of art itself – which forms the boundary among the various roles. Working from Susan Leigh-Star and Greismer's concept of the “boundary object,”⁵³ we can see how the differences in

⁵² We choose the discourse of art rather than architecture for heuristic purposes – not that there is any substantive difference between them, but rather, that the division of labor in the “art world” is perhaps more transparent.

⁵³ Star and Griesemer, pp 392–3.

people's valuations of an object, and the differences in the meanings they impart to it, serve to organize and coordinate. The object itself can be credited with the job of coordinating the action around it because each individual co-opts the object to serve his own interests in ways he would not be able to do alone.

Consider each of the "art world" roles in turn:

- *For the artist*, the work of art may be a personal expression or statement, a reflection of a universal idea, or even the happenstance byproduct of a creative process. When the artwork is sold, it is not sold for money, but for the ability to continue working – to continue with artistic production.
- *For the critic*, the work of art is a discursive act that not only adds a statement to the thread of the discourse, but proposes new directions for it, as well. The value of the work is as a *philosophical* proposition.
- *For the collector*, the work of art is an economic value, in terms of both money and status. This value is not so simply the sum of the material values that went into the production. (After all, if it were only the labor involved and the content of what is being represented by the work, then the collector would simply commission replicas of anything she liked and no art world would exist). Rather, the economic value is arrived at in the interactions between artist-and-public, artists-and-critic, and critic-and-collector.

Each of these different translations of the artwork and the ways in which the different translations coordinate to make a system are so familiar to us that we forget that the totality of the "art world" is not an idea that was conceived in the mind of any individual. No one proposed, "Let's coordinate in this way to produce aesthetic objects and create a sustainable, effective, and legitimate discourse around them." The object of the work of art has to precede the coordination; without it, none of these allies in the production of art has the means to undertake its individual enterprise – the artist for his ability to create, the critic for his ability to analyze, and the collector for his ability to appraise. But once the object is in public view, the parties coordinate around it simply by acting on their respective translations of the value of the object – the artist offering it up for consumption, the critic imparting it with a constructed value, and the collector judging its worth. The *object on view* is the genesis of the discourse.

The value of an art object is created in the discussion among the artist, critic, and collector. But the communication between them is not direct; it is mediated by the object. The introduction of an object into the system complicates the interindividual process through which innovation is negotiated. The object allows for different translations – different sets of ontological assumptions through which the art object is evaluated – to coexist. While the artist, critic, and collector point in the same direction at the same material thing, they are actually interacting with different objects.

In architectural discourse, likewise, the material object placed on view is a speech act around which innovation and the construction of new logics of space and time are negotiated. The processes of sociation are mediated by the real, physical presence of the building and the diverse interactions of the designer, the occupants, the critics, et al. with the material object. The independent existence of the building is neither an objective fact, as Sigfried Giedion would maintain, nor is it slippery subjectivity, as the relativist might advise. The teasing out of what the object *does* and how the object's action is co-opted in the negotiation of what the object *means* would reveal a social process – a structural scaffold – for framing the construction and evolution of the building's objective existence.

If buildings are real participants – actors – in the discourse of architecture, then we must consider the active role that they must play in history, as well, and not just as products to be compared and/or contrasted with verbal discourse and theory, i.e., with claims made about them. We have argued that the ontologies in which the design of a building is conceived surface as a form of control even when the overt intention of the designer is to undermine such determinism. By extension, the act of giving material form to an idea amounts to holding the architectural proposition, the underlying logic of the design, in deferment. Following the ruminations of sociologist of art Joanna Bron, we call this deferment of an idea in material form “storage.”

A building is a means by which the ontology of an architectural idea can be suspended or stored outside of the machinations of the discourse. Mies van der Rohe’s conceptions of space and time are embodied in the Farnsworth house. Because they are made material and this material manifestation acts on the inhabitants in ways which are immutable, the anachronistic social construct can be re-lived in the building even now. When an architectural idea is manifested in built form, it is committed to the memory of the discourse in a way that distinguishes it from discourses that traffic only in ideas. The action upon the individual who occupies the Farnsworth house has a duration and an empirical weight that Mies van der Rohe’s verbal utterances in the discourse – or even his drawings or models – do not.

In a sense, an innovation is the privatization of an idea. By definition, it would seem, the idea can never again be an innovation; it has already been claimed. And while the idea can be recalled or referenced, these are repetitions and not innovations. But in fact, old ideas can become new. There is a familiar cycle in professional discourses: they deal with common, messy problems of general interest, then they recede into abstract problems interesting only within the discipline, and then they return again to problems of wider social concern.⁵⁴ We have argued that an idea or innovation is often conflated with the construct of space and time – the ontology – in which it is conceived. When in the course of time the relations between the people, things, and practices in a discourse evolve, the innovative idea and the ontology are decoupled. An old idea can indeed be taken up again and still be innovative in a new context.

The cycle depends on this ability of the discourse to forget. But where constructs of space and time are preserved in the material form of a building, and the building acts out its ontology on those who encounter it, this means of forgetting is lost. The idea behind the Farnsworth house – to erase the will of the architect and client from the action of the building – becomes conflated with the Taylorist ontology in which the building was conceived. So long as the idea is coupled with the ontology, it remains an idea that can only be referenced or repeated, and not one that will be [considered] innovative.

ARCHITECTS DO NOT RECONSIDER THE PRACTICE OF ROOTED ARCHITECTURE – of “bauen” in Hannes Meyer’s terms – precisely because the concept is intricately linked with a particular oeuvre of now outmoded buildings. And so instead of returning to the idea of the *vita activa*, the discourse recedes further and further into abstraction – away from relevance. The discourse of architecture, its criticism, and its history must contend not only with a complex, narrative network

⁵⁴ Abbott, p 830.

constructed of the social interactions of people, buildings, and practices, but with the conundrum of immutable logics that are stored within material buildings and re-lived by their inhabitants.

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