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ARCHITECTURE FIDDLES WHILE THE WORLD BURNS[1]

The title of this text is a quote from Jeremy Till's recent book *Architecture Depends*.[2] He notes

> *In the last chapter of Architecture and Utopia, Manfredo Tafuri writes of the impossible position of the architect: caught within the structure of capitalism, the architect has lost any means of resistance. Tafuri's most devastating argument is that architecture has deluded itself into believing that the production of form alone can intervene productively in the social world, and that this delusion has hidden the real state of affairs in which fresh form has been appropriated by the very forces of capital that it presumes to escape. The final sentence of the book talks of 'impotent and ineffectual myths, which so often serve as illusions that permit the survival of anachronistic hopes in design.' Tafuri's trenchant argument—he talks of being 'uselessly painful' because it is useless to struggle for escape when completely enclosed and confined without an exit,'—leaves no apparent way out of the conundrum, and so led his critics to talk of the death of architecture. Answering this charge, Tafuri*

2 Jeremy Till: *Architecture Depends* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).

sees 'architecture obliged to return to pure architecture, to form without
utopia; in the best case to sublime uselessness.' It is too easy to take these
words at face value, to escape from the pressures and just fiddle while
the world burns. But that sentence is surely not a prescription but a pro-
vocation, with all its caustic sarcasm meant to shake the profession out
of its slumber.[3]

Tafuri's quote dates back to 1975 and amazingly, the profession as much as acade-
mia still seems to be in this slumber. Or maybe, it is a different slumber. I'm not sure.

It was probably too easy to remain there, sleepwalking. Too easy to just go on
and unwittingly fulfil the great man's prophecy. Architecture retreated further
and further into autonomy, equally architecture as building and architecture as
thinking. But, also: both went into different rooms.

It is as if we suddenly find ourselves in a world were one part says:
Well, you know, I told you so. Told you that it would happen. Was only a
matter of time until the whole thing went up in smoke. Might have said
something else until recently, but, you know, deep down, always thought
it was going to happen. So, let's change ship.

And then, there's the other part that says:
Uh, let's wait for a bit. Let's just keep building (or thinking) for some
time. This surely isn't going to last.

So, we have those who are leaving the sinking ship and those who've decided to
stay on it for another while.

Those who will stay on it will probably continue to theorise or be theorised
about.

What might they theorise about? Maybe autonomy?

Autonomy is interesting. It is something that architecture, like any other cul-
tural field, is so good at.

The American sociologist Magali Sarfatti Larson notes "autonomy is justi-
fied by the professional's claim of possessing a special and superior knowledge,
which should therefore be free of lay evaluation and protected from inexpert
interference."[4] Garry Stevens writes that architecture even strives to increase its
autonomy. Yet, he also argues "no other field is less autonomous in terms of its
relationship with other cultural fields."[5]

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3 Ibid., p. 189.

4 Magali Sarfatti Larson: "In the Matter of Experts and Professionals, or How Impossible It Is
to Leave Nothing Unsaid." In: *The Formation of Professions*, ed. Rolf Torstendahl and Michael
Burrage (London: Sage, 1990), p. 31.

5 Garry Stevens: *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction*

Looking from the outside, Till observes, "it is almost laughable to think that architecture, as practice and product, could be seen as autonomous. And yet, from within the black box of the profession of architecture, it somehow seems a sensible move to keep the practice and products inside the walls, there to treat them as autonomous processes and objects. That way you can control them better. … The walls of the black box protect architects from the contingencies of the world beyond, allowing them to develop theories and practices unfettered by others."[6]

You're still in your separate room on the (I would say sinking) ship, call it black box, or call it—Tafuri's term again—*prison* and left to perform "brilliant gymnastics": technology, beauty, criticality, projectivity, autopoeiesis, you name it. But—"how ineffectual are the brilliant gymnastics carried out in the yard of the model prison, in which architects are left free to move about on temporary reprieve?"[7] You are about to fulfil his prophecy: you're doing pure architecture that is sublimely useless.

Yet, as Till further declares, it is "a prison yard of architecture's own making."[8].

By retreating from the world and staying put within this self-inflicted, self-implemented separation from the world (practice within practice and discourse within discourse), practice—as well as academia (at least architectural academia) is—broadly speaking—refusing to deal with economic, political and social issues as well as 'real people' and the world as such (a discussion that includes ethical and moral values and responsibilities). At the same time it leads to the complete marginalisation of the profession and the discipline and a self-imposed limitation on its capability and 'power' or its negation thereof.

Still, it is a comfortable position. Architects typically desperately want to build—often regardless. They are, through indoctrinated architectural mythology, conditioned to believe in the power a building can have. They live in the hope—against hope—that fame is just one step away. And who would really risk this, would go out into the world and refuse a job simply because they feel site safety isn't met, that their client isn't adhering to ethical values, that the clearing of a building site might involve the forced displacement of an existing community.

And that's because they, the Architects with a capital 'A', believe in the redemptive power of form (or technology)—above all else. Discourse (and that in-

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(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), p. 93.

6   Till, see note 2, pp. 17–19.

7   Manfredo Tafuri: *Theories and History of Architecture* (London: Granada, 1980), p. xxii.

8   Ibid., p. 189.

cludes buildings) is practiced as an internalised discipline of formal production in which words, shapes and details assume equivalence in terms of their supposed power but eventual impotence.

Yet, if understood from a sociological point of view, discourse includes "all that a particular category of agents say (or write) in a specific capacity and in a definable thematic area. Discourse commonly invites dialogue."[9]

In that, it is then important, how open this dialogue is and who it is that participates or is entitled to participate in this dialogue.

This is not to dismiss the role of theory, but to see theory as isolated from practice and practice isolated from theory is to miss the point.

As Jeremy Till and I have written elsewhere[10], the discussion about whether we are living in a critical or post-critical era seems almost irrelevant since these terms circle round each other. It is the fate of all terms 'post-' that they can never escape the grip of the condition that they would wish to ensue and succeed. Just, as Zygmunt Bauman notes, postmodernity is no more than "modernity without illusions",[11] so, Jeremy Till and I have argued post-theorising is theorising without brains. The critical is an immanent condition of architecture since architecture as a discipline is inherently political.[12] Autonomy is out of the question, since to be relevant architecture needs to be situated firmly in, and working with, the context of the world beyond because architects—those writing, researching, building and producing architecture—are but one part of a much wider social system. Architecture needs to be a socially and politically aware form of agency, critical of the social and economic formations of its context in order to engage better with it in a transformative and emancipatory manner.[13]

Which bring us to this elusive term *agency*—which could be seen, as an anonymous reviewer of a text on spatial agency recently noted, as just another architectural cliché or trope or " the latest version of an intellectual fetish process that once offered us the 'cut' and then the 'gaze' as seemingly profound terms that perhaps didn't turn out to be as profound as they might have seemed."

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9   Magali Sarfatti Larson: *Behind the Postmodern Facade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 5.

10 Schneider and Till: *Beyond Discourse: Notes on Spatial Agency*, pp. 97–111.

11 Zygmunt Bauman: *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 32.

12 The term critical is understood in the early Frankfurt School sense, as something that starts out with an unravelling of the social reality of the given condition so as to be able to understand how to transform it into something better.

13 See note 10, p. 98.

He went on to say that terms such as agency should not necessarily be avoided but they ought to be used in a critical and circumspect way.

He is perfectly right.

Architectural criticism, maybe architecture per se, has seen too many of those terms—whether that was (and still is) criticality, realism, pragmatism, progressive or projective architecture. As was the case with the Harvard Design Magazine Reader entitled *The New Architectural Pragmatism*, rethinking of architecture and architecture's value usually comes packaged as something that addresses (or deliberately denies) the architect's social responsibility. Typically, the question is limited in scope right from the outset by adding something like, "but how much should we ask of architecture?" William Saunders, the editor of this Harvard Design Magazine Reader, proposes an answer to this, which is printed on the dust cover: "architecture must be at once flexible and robust, responsive and self-directed."[14]

I am not sure whether these terms actually mean much, or indeed anything. If you add why and how to this list, you're none the wiser.

Flexible in what way?

Responsive to what?

Even self-directed is ambiguous.

While starting by setting out the socio-political context, most of these approaches in the end defer to the idea of retreat and non-engagement. Agency, on the other hand, inevitably addresses the context beyond the black box, in so much as it is always engaged with the actions for and of others.

Agency, in this context therefore is not a further attempt at the commodificaton of knowledge. Agency questions the 'authority' of the architect, which still seems to be the prerequisite for one's credibility as a professional. It questions the mythology of the individual, the sole architect as hero-author as played out through the so-familiar figures of Rem*s*, Zaha*s*, Norman*s* et al, which give a comforting familiarity with genius that disguises the reality of how little of the built environment is associated with any architect-author.

In that sense, agency is about the architect as an anti-hero—someone that is in many ways the opposite of the above. Yet, it is also more than just the opposite —since I'm not just after straw (wo)men or the heads of Rem, Zaha or Norman.

Although agency challenges the norms of professional behaviour, it doesn't disregard the role of professional knowledge. "Superior, differentiated and highly

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14 William Saunders (ed.): *The new Architectural Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), dust jacket.

specialised activities have never been separate from everyday practice," Lefebvre says "but have only appeared to be so."[15] What this suggests, Jeremy Till argues is "that professional knowledge needs to be seen as part of a network that weaves together human and nonhuman, specialized knowledge with everyday insights, rules with instincts, the social sciences with the social. It asks the profession to be part of the networks of others, and in this confronts it with its very worst fear, that of being normal."[16]

To be an architect in that sense, to be an agent, is to act with intent and purpose, yet not just applying learned procedures. Purpose is also guided by hunch, intuition, negotiation, and other conditioned reflexes. Anthony Giddens says that first and foremost agency "presumes the capability of acting otherwise."[17] And, although this phrase is seemingly quite harmless, it opens up a large can of worms.

To admit to the possibility of doing otherwise is against the instinct of the professional since this means to offer up one's fragility, and this is the symptom of the amateur, a symptom that must be avoided at all costs. To accept this sense of agency is also is also to accept a new sense of what it may mean to be an architect, one in which the lack of a predetermined future is seen as an opportunity and not a threat.[18]

Till argues that "for the given to be seen as a place of potential, one has to rid it of the negative connotations of mess and chaos. The only way to do this is by understanding the contingency of the given, in its very uncertainty and openness toward establishing something else, as an opportunity and not a threat: to see that freedom is to be found in the recognition of contingency and not outside of it."[19]

The contingency of the given, the hope and potential of encounters between the professional (architect) and human (all others) is a fundamental to what Giddens calls *mutual knowledge*[20]. Knowledge that is generated as collective action in understanding and working with the 'other' is fundamental in that it provides the counterpart to *discursive consciousness*. Hunch and intuition versus or, more exactly, negotiating with explicit and explainable matters. The lines between the practical and the theoretical are fluctuating, continuously shifting and permeable, with each drawing on the other in the act of agency.

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15 Henri Lefebvre: *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. John Moore, vol. 1 (London: Verso, 1991), p. 86.

16 See note 2, p. 165.

17 Anthony Giddens: *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), p. 216.

18 See note 10, p. 98.

19 See note 2, p. 191.

20 See note 17, p. 4.

Again this is a challenge to professional norms, both academic and architectural. If one cannot explicate, then one cannot claim authority; hence the domination of the discursive over the practical, of discourse over doing. Hence too the marginalisation of discourse as it increasingly needs to feed off itself, discourse on discourse, in an ever-spiralling effect of internalisation with its accompanying autonomy. Just at the moment, in late 2009, when the crisis caused by the unfettered market is forcing even the most hardened institutions to rethink their values, practices that have been critical of the hegemony appear not so much as radical alternatives, but as prescient harbingers of new ways of acting.[21]

Nothing is new really. We're still surrounded by the same questions. Yet, as Mike Davis suggests, "We are looking into an unprecedented abyss of economic and social turmoil that confounds our previous perceptions of historical risk. Our vertigo is intensified by our ignorance of the depth of the crisis or any sense of how far we might ultimately fall."[22]

The call for papers for this colloquium asked "How does architecture respond to the Empire". Well, you could ask: how does architecture respond at all to the above?

And if you were really honest, you might say: It hasn't so far.

Epilogue

At the end of the workshop session for which I had prepared this paper I was, alongside all other presenters, invited to the stage for a plenary session.

The room where the workshop and plenary took place was the Oberlichtsaal in the main building of the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar on Geschwister-Scholl-Straße 8. The room itself is level, chairs for the audience were arranged in rows. To the right and in front of this set-up was one table for the session chair and his assistant. To the right and opposite from the table for the session chairs and in front of the audience, the lectern that had been there for the presentations had been replaced by a long table behind which we, the presenters, were supposed to take a seat and questions.

For me, this set up in itself—the clear hierarchy of power, knowledge and authority expressed in and through space was something that I had challenged and questioned in my presentation. Lines between the different parties—the chair,

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21 See note 10, p. 99. For examples of spatial agency please refer to www.spatialagency.net.
22 Mike Davis: *Can Obama See the Grand Canyon? On Presidential Blindness and Economic Catastrophe* (2008 cited March 22, 2009); available from <http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/174989/mike_davis_casino_capitalism_obama_and_us>.

the speakers, the audience—were too clearly drawn, real exchange of ideas not wanted.

In order to illustrate the argument that I put forward in my presentation and this paper, I left the stage and joined the audience, noting that for me the spatial control exerted through the setup was an architectural gesture indicative for the stasis within which architecture has found itself in. By acting upon this through simply shifting my personal and political space I raised the anger of the session chair who repeatedly shouted at me: **"That is not architecture!"** Quite what architecture, in his opinion was, he didn't say.

My simple spatial redeployment nonetheless constituted an infringement of the given set of rules and accepted code of behaviour—after all I questioned his 'authority', joined the 'non-experts' and became 'normal'—which was clearly not wanted and did not fit in.

Yet, if we accept this expanded role for the architect along the lines discussed above and if we do want architecture and architects to be useful, we need to continue to contest and dispute given boundaries, get out of that Tafurian slumber, and intervene creatively and productively in order to be relevant to the wider social world.