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Architecture Depends

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Book, exhibition and film reviews

Critical review essay: Dependency Theory on Trial

Architecture Depends

By Jeremy Till

The MIT Press, 2009

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Inside the court room

Architecture Depends is an engaging and provocative critique of the fuzzy world of architecture that has more than a hint of a show trial about it. The chief prosecutor in this case is Till, who supported by his favourite witnesses, Zygmunt Bauman and Bruno Latour, enters the courtroom brandishing his axe and pen. Equipped with an idiosyncratic armoury of anecdotes and philosophical diversions, he announces to the court that his role is to seek the truth, to root out the dangerous ideas, individuals and myths that continue to plague contemporary architectural practice.

The trial is split into three sessions. First to stand in the dock is the idea of architecture as a closed, autonomous practice devoted to realising the mission of the Beaux Arts. Simultaneously, modernism, or what Till sometimes refers to as the 'modern project' is roundly accused of being responsible for a pernicious ideology of 'order, purity and obtuse abstraction.' Why is this he asks? Because, 'If the will to order is an identifying feature of the modern project, then the means to that end lies in the elimination of the

"other" of order; it lies in the ridding of contingency.' (37) And just in case there is any doubt about what he means he adds that, 'contingency can not be tolerated in the modern project, be it architectural, political, social or philosophical.' (38) The queue of defendants from architecture's rogue's gallery stretches down the corridor, and in quick succession they are wheeled in to be subjected to interrogation. Vitruvius, Le Corbusier, Siegfried Giedeon, Mies, Louis Kahn and various stars from architecture's firmament are all found wanting or guilty.

There is considerable confusion as the threat of six months in the re-education department of the Ministry of Contingency hangs over the defendant's heads. But it is not just the profession that is riddled with saboteurs but schools of architecture that appear to harbour masters of subterfuge who are plotting to ensure that 'Architectural education does everything it can to disguise its autonomy and resultant stasis.' (14) Turning to the raised eyebrows in the public gallery the prosecutor suggests a remedy and confidently announces that: 'We need to escape the shadow of enlightenment philosophy and the assertion of the right to reason.' (55) We need to declare unequivocally that 'we have never been modern.' More than anything, he adds, we must build a conception of architectural practice that is conscious of its dependence on social and economic forces and of its integration into a network of different disciplines

and contexts. A disgruntled murmur spreads amongst the public audience as individuals turn their heads to see exactly who these unrepentant formalists are that actively camouflage social reality.

Session Two of the trial. The prosecutor causes more confusion since it is not entirely clear whether he is targeting individuals or the profession when he accuses architecture of failing to engage with time and the 'everyday'. Modernism is called to the dock again, and this time is charged with the expulsion of time. More generally architectural practice is accused of either ignoring time, making it eternal or depicting it as no more than a linear sequence. (79) Nobody and nothing is off limits. Now is the moment, we are told, finally to jettison the rigid and deterministic concept of a universal solution to the problems of the contemporary city. (134) To accomplish this we require nothing short of a paradigm shift that begins with the realisation that 'All architecture is waste in transit.' (67) At this stage, and somewhat starry eyed, Till describes how he can see emerging out of the smouldering ruins of the enlightenment and modernity a new architecture that is defined by *thick* time and *slack* space, an architectural chronotope that will allow life to unfold naturally rather than be obliged to suffer the indignities of utopian planning (96). Oblivious to cries of dissent from the gallery, the prosecutor continues with his manifesto. 'What we need is a lo-fi, indeterminate, and uncertain architecture that prioritises entropy, use and change, (104) that replaces imposition with negotiation, transgresses conventional boundaries, and is always alert to context.' (145) He completes this part of his critique with a warning; 'Architecture

that ignores the everyday will be ignored everyday.' (137)

There is a temporary lull in the proceedings whilst the windows are opened to extract some of the heat accumulating in the public gallery. 'Call the third defendant.' The prosecutor wheels out the profession. He tears into it with a renewed fire. He attacks it for its arrogance, for its false cult of the expert, for the phoney aesthetics and ethics underpinning much of its activities. He bemoans the naïveté of community architecture, maintaining that architectural knowledge 'should be reconsidered away from any notions of authority and certainty.' (165) As stalwarts of the profession gasp for breath, he launches himself into another attack and can hardly stop himself from ridiculing what he sees as one of the great myths of architecture. This is the ghost of architectural determinism, the largely discredited idea that architecture can change the world that he summarises in the equation, bad architecture = bad behaviour = bad morals (and *ergo*, good architecture = good morals = good behaviour) (177). He at last reaches the end of his case for the prosecution. He tells us that if architecture is to be saved, it needs a new ethics. Rather than imposing a set of abstract and universal moral codes from without, Architecture should develop an ethical agenda from within, from the particular and specific character of a given situation. (186) To accomplish this a new model architect is required. This version will be unrecognisable from the heroic, omnipotent comic book criminal of high modernism. The architect will be reborn, as a storyteller and as an interpreter of complex situations. With that he slams shut the

covers of his thick volume of notes and evidence. Architecture has been put on trial, and found guilty.

The above I think is a reasonable summary of the critique and manifesto that weave their way through the book. 'No, architecture is not autonomous it is contingent. Architecture isn't just about icons and space, it should embrace the everyday and the temporal. Architecture is unethical; it needs a new ethical code'. But whilst there is much that I agree with in Till's thesis, I also harbour doubts about some of the claims and generalisations, particularly in the way he depicts modernity and the enlightenment.

Autonomy and contingency

On a very fundamental point I am not convinced of the existence of these villains that are proselytising the mission of the Beaux Arts. In reality, I am not sure I know of any one who really believes that architecture is an autonomous creative process that occurs in a social and economic vacuum. Even out and out formalists are more than aware of the network of dependent relationships that they must engage with. They simply wish that they didn't have to. Similarly, although the culture of architectural education might still be imbued with the idea of 'a building as an autonomous art object', I have seldom met an academic or student who really thinks that it is. If anything, Till's alternative manifesto for a 'narrative led, contingent architecture, that is conscious of entropy, waste and the everyday' is all the rage in schools of architecture, especially those populated by teachers steeped in Lefebvre, The Situationists, and critical theory. And on this point for all his comments about contingent

and dependent relations, it is curious that Till hardly mentions the most immediate contingent relationships that delimit and structure the production of architecture; government diktat, the economic priorities of major landowners and construction firms and the operations of the property market.

As for the critique of *autonomy*, I can't imagine a world without it any more than Oscar Wilde could imagine life with out the promise of utopia. To dream of the autonomy of architecture is to aspire to making buildings unhindered by the logic of capital accumulation and the gloomy world of land values and private landownership. To imagine utopia is to keep alive the sensibility that another world and therefore another architecture is possible. This is why although it is essential to educate students about the reality of capitalist building production, it is equally important to give them the opportunity to create a momentary 'heterotopia' if for no other reason than to ask 'what if?' This is what I understand by Harvey's phrase 'dialectical utopia' - it refers to the 'temporary autonomous zone' in which we can find the space and time to speculate and experiment with embryonic forms of a post-capitalist architectural practice. The problem then as I see it, is not autonomy, but recognising the limits to it set by the undoubtedly dependent situation that the practice of architecture finds itself in. In other words it is not either/or, 'autonomy or contingency' that seems to be what Till suggests, but about the dialectical relationship between the two. They are mutually interdependent categories.

Alongside this is Till's argument that part of the problem lies in architecture's illicit love affair with the process of abstraction. His solution is: 'to

release architecture from the clutches of abstract thought and allow it to be shaped by the contingent forces of temporal flux.' (116) I am not sure what this means. I have always understood abstract theory as an often difficult but essential investigative tool for interrogating the social world. For Marx, abstract theory was indispensable, and lay at the root of his working method and diagnosis of the 'empirical' reality of capitalist production. Furthermore, if social reality, as Mikhail Bakhtin, Theodore Adorno and Lefebvre suggest is impossible to represent or to replicate in any meaningful sense in literature, film or art, let alone a studio environment, then the tendency towards abstraction is surely both necessary and inevitable. It is also why faced with the difficulty of capturing the dynamic character of every day life in revolutionary Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, painters like Carra, Popova and Malevic turned to non-figurative art. The problem occurs when the pursuit of the abstract becomes an end in itself and loses any communicative and explanatory power. In other words if within modernism there was a tendency towards fetishising abstraction, such as in the formal pattern making of some urban planning, the fault is not of 'abstraction' but of what people do with abstract theory.

Modernity and the Enlightenment

In a similar vein it is unclear to me exactly what this 'modern project' is that denies contingency. It seems to refer mainly to what Till calls 'classical modernism.' Equally I am confused by his suggestion that we need to escape the legacy of enlightenment philosophy and 'its assertion of the right of reason'. This

is contested terrain. If anything I think we need reason more than ever in a world that is distinguished by irrationalism and superstition. What is important, as with the notion of autonomy and utopia, is to recognise the limits and historical context of the Enlightenment concept of reason. Battling against the inherited prejudices of the mediaeval world, the enlightenment call to reason was entirely predictable in the sense that 'the programme of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy.'¹ This is how I like to think of the Enlightenment, as the cultural wing of the revolutionary early bourgeoisie who were understandably dazzled by the discoveries in the natural and physical sciences.

Economically, philosophically and politically, the enlightenment paved the way for Adam Smith, Hegel, and Marx, and despite their obvious political differences, the modern project for them was to understand capitalism as part of the *greatest modern project* of all, the pursuit and realisation of freedom. It is not reason or rational thought that is the problem, but their *historical* development within the *context of capitalist societies* and one-party dictatorships. This is when reason is transformed into a violent form of instrumental rationalism in which the world and everything in it is subjected to a process of capitalist quantification, calculation and commodification. This at least is the conclusion that I have always drawn from Adorno and Horkheimer's *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* published at the end of the Second World War after they had witnessed at first hand the transformation of the enlightenment into its

antithesis, 'the wholesale deception of the masses.'² It is the *dialectic* of order and disorder, reason and madness, certainty and uncertainty that defines the enlightenment and modern project. It is manifest in such phenomena as the subsumption of scientific knowledge to capital, the transformation of urban planning into class and ethnic cleansing, and the commodification of rebellion. In short, *capitalist* modernity illuminates the tragic reality that 'the curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression.'³

As for modernist architects, it is true that they were obsessed with order, cleanliness and idealised plans. But there were very good *historical* reasons as to why, not least cholera and tuberculosis. I admittedly have a very particular concept of modernism, which is founded in a critique of capitalist society. As such my 'modern project' is more of a lineage, a militant tradition that connects the revolutionary urbanism of the Paris Commune, to the Constructivists' working method, the work of Tecton, and onwards to the social programmes of the welfare state. It is true that modern architects like Mosei Ginzburg and Lubetkin were fired by a missionary zeal to bring a semblance of order to the persistent social and spatial inequality of the capitalist city. But they also fully understood the contingent relations within which architecture operated, whether it was in relation to mortality rates, mathematics, electricity or political ideology.

Again it is not the universal ambitions of modernist architects that I see as the problem (for instance the universal ambition to end urban poverty), nor is it their belief in certainty and authority (after all is that not what a client expects in the same way

that a patient presumes that the doctor has been to medical school?). It is to understand universality in its relationship to the particular and the specific, or to put it another way to balance or rather understand the dialectical relationship between social freedom and individual liberty. Of course the modern movement did not deliver social redemption, it couldn't, but at its best it was driven by a profound sense of the social role of architecture. As such I like to see the projects of the modernist avant-garde less as failures, and more as experiments in the long history of articulating what that role might be.

Time

Till argues that Architects freeze time (94) and that architectural practice whether in industry or academia, either ignores time, tries to make it eternal, or understands it only as a linear sequence. He illustrates his argument with a quotation from Lefebvre who commented that the 'expulsion of time is arguably one of the hall marks of modernity.' (85) It might well be true that architecture does not adequately employ the 'temporal', as a tool of enquiry, but the idea that it is somehow absent from the activities of practising architects and teachers is questionable. Building performance, the study of buildings in use, conservation, restoration, nomadic, kinetic, interactive, temporary and event led architecture, all deal with questions of time in a more sophisticated than Till suggests. As for modernism being somehow synonymous with a rupture and a break with history, this is also questionable. From an historical perspective it is perfectly understandable why many modern architects wanted to

disconnect themselves from the corrupted world of Imperial urban construction, profound socio-spatial inequality, and from what they saw as decadent forms of eclecticism and neo-classicism. But then this is probably true of each new generation that for whatever reason, scientific, political or technological feels itself to be on the threshold of time. It was certainly a common conceit in the nineteenth century when Hegelian ideas were popular not least for Dostoevsky who in Peter Petrovich creates a character who declares with sure footed confidence, 'In a word, we have irrevocably severed ourselves from the past and that, in my opinion, is something worthwhile, sir.'⁴

But modernist time is only superficially concerned with the idea of the 'break'. More importantly as Till's quotations from Lefebvre and Baumann underline, it is about becoming conscious of the history of time, of the modern struggle to order and control it, such as the temporal invention of the clocking in card and the factory siren. In this sense modernist time was about Taylorism, Fordism, time and motion studies, relative surplus value, and developing new techniques for the mass-production of pre-fabricated building materials as a moral and historical imperative to solve the housing crisis. This it strikes me is a far more important and interesting aspect of modernist time. It is not I would argue so much about 'freezing' or 'expulsion', it is far more about acceleration, speed and dislocation. It is about the temporal transformation of the modern city, resplendent with its travelators, escalators, telegraphs, zeppelins, telephones, electric lights, trams and cinema houses. The time of the modern city is kinetic. It is brilliantly captured in

the early photographs of Moholy Nagy, in films like Dziga Vertov's, *Man With a Movie Camera*, and in novels like Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*, that describes a very modern city of urban blocks and boulevards torn apart in an orgy of temporal and spatial uncertainty, where 'streets transform passers-by into shadows',⁵ and windows are simply 'holes cut into unembraceable infinities'.⁶ In answer then to Till's question to the classical modernists 'How can they have it both ways', that is 'to stand out side of history and appeal to the Zeitgeist', (82) I would argue that this is to be entirely expected and is another example of the real nature of modernity as something profoundly contradictory.

The debate about the nature of modernism will no doubt continue. I will however leave the last word to one of the greatest poets of modernity. Till quotes the lyrical phrase 'All that is solid melts into air.' These are not the words of Baudelaire but of Marx and Engels. But they are far more powerful when placed in the context of the whole passage that begins; '*Constant revolutionising* of production, *uninterrupted disturbance* of all social conditions, *everlasting uncertainty and agitation* distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.'⁷ This for them (and myself) was what modernity was all about. Not as you can see some fetishised notion of order and certainty, but if anything its complete opposite, about the transitory temporally and spatially fragmented and unpredictable character of modern life, in which the only sure thing in the words of Georg Lukacs, was that the nature of history 'is precisely that every definition degenerates into an illusion: history is the history

of the unceasing overthrow of the objective forms that shape the life of man.⁸

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Notes and references

1. Adorno, T and Horkheimer, M, *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (London, Verso, 1989; 1944), p. 3.
2. *Ibid.*, pp, 41–42.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
4. 'In my personal opinion, if you like, something definite has been accomplished; new and useful ideas have spread, new and useful writings disseminated in place of the old dreamy and romantic ones; literature has assumed a tinge of maturity; many harmful prejudices have been uprooted and held up to ridicule — In a word, we have irrevocably severed ourselves from the past and that, in my opinion, is something worthwhile, sir.' Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *Crime and Punishment* (Moscow, Raduga Publishers, 1985).
5. Bely, Andrei, *Petersburg* (London, Penguin, 1983), p. 22.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
7. The rest of it proceeds thus: 'All fixed, fast-frozen relations with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and options are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.' Marx, K. and Engels, F, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, Penguin, 1980), p. 83.
8. Lukacs, Georg, *History and Class Consciousness* (London, Merlin Press, 1983), p. 186.