Defying the Avant-Garde Logic: Architecture, Populism, and Mass Culture

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'One stout fellow - practical and politically long-committed - became frustrated (after a two-hour slide show on American consumerism) by the Venturis' politically uncommitted position,' wrote Haig Beck in 1976 of a presentation at Peter Cook's ArtNet Rally held in London the previous summer, '[h]e grew so dismayed by their preoccupation with rich men's houses that when question time came round he finally gave vent to his exasperation: "You are," he angrily challenged Denis Scott Brown, "elitist!".'[1]

The accusation of 'elitism' is a typical populist diatribe. Populism posits an elite as its adversary, whether a moneyed elite, an academic elite, or a power elite, and questions its legitimacy, arguing in favour of the elite's antagonist, 'the people', either in the form of 'the low', 'the everyday', 'the ordinary' or other. It reflects the constant deployment of the egalitarian ideal - the very ideal the bourgeoisie originally used to undermine the legitimacy of the elite of feudal society, aristocracy, and to legitimize its own status and position. The fluidity of the populist argument is expressed in the re-alignments and re-identification of different elites as the adversary, and consequently in the creation of very different, even contradictory, adversarial relationships. As Ernesto Laclau recently explained, populism concerns not so much an ideological programme, but, rather, a discursive dynamic consistently upsetting any established hierarchy of cultural values or political priorities.[2]

Within architecture, the institutions of the discipline are among the targets of such arguments, and their antagonists are the forms and types of architecture excluded at a certain moment from these institutions, whether the so-called folkloric, vernacular, or popular architecture, the products of industrialization and commercial building, or other products of consumerism and mass culture. Whereas the attacks against 'high' architecture are often instigated by subjects or groups located outside the discipline in the name of 'the people', vanguard groups within disciplinary boundaries have adopted similar arguments as a means of buttressing their challenge to the dominant architecture of their period.

Applying knowledge from outside the discipline is certainly not a recent phenomenon in architecture, as exemplified by the incorporation of rustic, vernacular elements in the neoclassical architecture of Ledoux, or by the influence of Greek villages and North African casbahs on the twentieth-century modernists. Such borrowings and expansions always include the creation of new hierarchies and interrelations between what was considered as belonging to the architecture discipline itself and its institutions, and what was considered extraneous. Whilst the borrowed elements, such as the vernacular, did modify the discipline and were incorporated into the practitioners' tool kits, disciplinary boundaries and boundaries between 'high' and 'low' architecture were both dislocated and firmly re-established.

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Among the diverse influences from outside the discipline are the 'vernacular', 'popular', 'regional', 'commercial', 'everyday', and 'banal'. This issue of *Footprint*, however, is particularly interested in the specific borrowings from mass culture and consumer society, whether from commercial vernacular architecture, advertisements, or commodities - a focus of interest of many of the 1960s neo-avant-gardes. In order to understand the specificities of architecture's borrowings from mass culture and consumer society, it is useful to contrast them to two major categories of borrowings that preceded these interests, namely traditional architecture and mass production.

Traditional architecture, the product of pre-modern, pre-industrial societies, has been a source of ongoing inspiration to architects practising in a modern, industrial (or post-industrial) society, providing what seems to be a form of stability or grounding in an environment of progressive, linear time and constant change, by turning to the transcendental, cyclical, or stable time of the traditional. Nineteenth-century romantic architecture could turn to the architecture of feudal society as a means of confronting the universality of neoclassicism, in order to devise an alternative to 'compromised' industrial society and its woes, or in order to establish a national identity. Twentieth-century modernists turned to traditional architecture at the peripheries of Europe or beyond - a traditional architecture positioned at a geographical rather than temporal distance.

The fascination of Gropius and Le Corbusier with the American grain silos signalled a disparate form of borrowing: learning from the utilitarian products of industrial society - a very different source of inspiration. The reference served a purpose: strengthening the argument in favour of a functionalist architecture, which is primarily assessed not by its artistic qualities, but by its utilitarian, rationalist value, and consequently de-legitimizing the academic tradition of the Beaux-Arts. It brought about a split between architects who continued to treat architecture as a fine art or craft - Scharoun, Mendelsohn, Loos - and architects who were intent on placing the modern building side by side other utilitarian industrial products - Gropius, Meyer, Hilberseimer, or Stam. In effect, the work of the latter architects tended to completely erase the border between architecture and its outside, merging the building with the industrial mass product.

The demand to integrate architecture into mass production was primarily argued as a necessity to better the lives of many through the mass provision of improved housing, and to assimilate the period's most advanced means of production into architecture. It was developed as part of a tight, consistent, and coherent legitimation of industrial development and progress. The egalitarian argument is embedded in the prominence given to mass housing and inscribed into the theories and procedures developed at the Bauhaus regarding industrialized production.

A more ambiguous example in this context is Le Corbusier: while his admiration for the products of industrial society was expressed in his association of the house with the machine, a utilitarian argument par excellence, his deployment of the car betrays a fascination similar - though at the same time somewhat different in perspective and emphasis - to the post-war generation's idolization of the products of consumer society. The car, a mass product of desire, is present in the photographs he commissioned of the Villa Stein and the Weissenhof House, as well as in the 'Eyes Which Do Not See: Automobiles' chapter of *Vers une architecture*. As a result, the presence of these two differing fascinations - with mass production and consumer society - co-existed not only within the discipline, but also within the work of a single architect.

The antagonism towards high and low, expressed in terms similar to those of contemporary discourse, emerged in the post-war years, in, for example, the discussions of the Independent Group in London, in which Lawrence Alloway and others attempted to undermine the social hierarchy of taste by levelling the field, arguing that the pop culture of those years should be valued as being equal to other cultural products. This new field of fascination and investigation differed from traditional art and architecture or from industrial products. It seemed to hold the promise of social mobility and suggested bypassing the Marxist concept of base and superstructure, while embracing the technologies of freely accessible communication and education for all. Consumption and fashion were considered to be capable of re-defining cultural values as embodied, for instance, in advertising and car design. Following the early example of Le Corbusier, the Smithsons, Reyner Banham, and Richard Hamilton would uphold the Cadillac and the DS as icons of their time and societal aspiration.

The realization that mass culture did not require an aesthetic disposition, that it was immediate, and the fact that it succeeded in gaining a popular following helped to present it as egalitarian and democratic, even though it was a vehicle for commercial interests. Moreover, the emergent youth culture of the 1950s, which would produce British Teddy Boys, Dutch *nozems*, Rockers, Mods, and many more subcultural styles among working-class and lower-middle-class youth, cultivated a distaste for the didactic middlebrow culture, which the newly established welfare state institutions were propagating via their cultural policies and public media. Consequently, the mass culture of the youth appeared to be rebellious and free, a grass-roots phenomenon; its dependence on the market was mostly overlooked or de-emphasized. Mass culture seemed to present the possibility of a genuine and authentic expression, in contrast to the policies of good taste, good living, and good form.

The opposition to disciplinary high architecture on behalf of 'a people's architecture' is also present in the use of the term 'ordinary' in Britain, employed by Raymond Williams and the Smithsons, for instance. 'Ordinary', unlike the term 'everyday', used in France and Germany in relation to the emergence of a revolutionary praxis, has a clear class identity: the 'ordinary' belongs to the common people, in colloquial English, rather than to the posh. In this sense, it has been deployed against an 'elite', against a dominant class, as a means of legitimating the culture of the masses.

The transposition of egalitarianism to art and architecture has produced some contradictions that are specific to these disciplines. Arguably, the most glaring contradiction lies in the position of a professional elite, such as architects or artists, presenting an argument against the elite to which they belong - most visible in the anti-art advocated by the artistic avant-gardes, but also in the rhetoric of architects who wished not only to borrow from architecture's outside influences, but also to level architecture with its antagonist. A similar but less apparent contradiction is the manner in which the specific groups agitating against their disciplinary 'elites' functioned as avant-garde cells, while presenting arguments that de-legitimate such practices: the idea of a vanguard that agitates the masses to follow in rebellion, which claims a special position for the intellectual group that delineates for the masses the route to social betterment, namely, the idea from which the political and artistic avant-garde developed, is in itself an 'elitist' concept that bestows a special role on an enlightened few - and an idea that is anathema to a populism based on 'the people'. Such a situation is visible in the machinations of the Situationist International, with the control of ideological purity and group membership exercised by Guy Debord emulating that of André Breton's command over the Surrealists, despite Debord's agitation against high art and against the artistic avant-gardes.

Two vanguard movements, which exemplify the manner in which egalitarianism could be incorporated into their own structure, were the Amsterdam Provos and Fluxus. The Provos' political, theoretical, and cultural production was based on a cherished form of amateurism. Provoking the police by organizing 'happenings' in the streets of Amsterdam, they developed an inclusive strategy aimed at undermining the exclusivity of the political and cultural institutions in the Netherlands of the 1960s. Just a little earlier, in New York, George Maciunas, founder of Fluxus, railed against high art, and in order to counter the celebrity and star status of artists, suggested that anyone could practice art under the name 'Fluxus' - thus, not only eclipsing individualism, but breaking open the tightly knit vanguard group and allowing populism to affect the structure of the group, rather than only its rhetoric. One of the beneficiaries of the openness of Fluxus was Josef Beuys, who initially appropriated the name 'Fluxus' en route to becoming a star artist in his own right. Beuys, following the theories of Rudolf Steiner, took on the role of educator and preacher, and attempted to replace a 'distracted' participation in a daily life of tedious routines with a higher state of cognition of the richness of everyday life's miniscule actions and moments.

Complicating the contradictions at play is the absence of the represented figure, in whose name revolution was preached and change advocated: the anonymous user, the common man, the faceless crowd. Already in 1959, Aldo van Eyck stated that the new architecture was to be 'By Us' and 'For Us', but half a century later we can only observe how the production conditions of architecture have aggravated the situation, with architectural design being transformed into an endless production of simulacra, the junkspaces and icons of the worldwide matrix that accommodates the spaces of flows. It is perhaps only natural that artists and architects alike once again turn to anthropology and social survey in order to recalibrate their own practices, to be able to re-engage, if only by starting to understand the new contexts in which one operates.

The cultural critique studied and represented here is part of what has become a substantial tradition. Its weakness is, arguably, that it is not satisfied with the alienation it registers, but that it also persists in looking for new strategies; not so much to aim for unification of what cannot be unified, but rather to re-appropriate what has been taken away. Looking at the current debates in architecture theory circles, ranging from the projective and performative to the new critical and pragmatist, Adorno's coupling of autonomy and engagement, namely the double character of art, remains firmly at the centre of the discourse; it rightfully deserves our constant re-examination. De Certeau's idea of *perruque*, the improper bending of the system to re-appropriate its technologies, never seemed more popular and relevant as these days, as demonstrated by guerrilla gardening or favela 'planning'. And even though the outcome of the street revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East is far from lucid, the Arab spring and the occupation of the Cairo Tahrir Square suggest that the Lefebvrian moment of the festival, rather than merely a utopian idea, is still a real possibility.

This issue of *Footprint* addresses some of these concerns, both directly and indirectly. Whereas the engagement with mass culture can, of course, be backdated to the historic avant-gardes in architecture and their re-conceptualizations of the house and city, from the Futurist manifesto, Constructivists' Agit-prop, and Bauhaus objects, to De Stijl space and Le Corbusier's purism, the focus here is on the post-war years and the negotiation of architecture with an ever more advanced consumer society within the context of welfare state redistributive policies. Industrial, productivist logic is mixed here with the biopolitics of the emerging late-capitalist spectacle, and with the shock and awe brought to us by the expanding mass-media networks.

Two of the articles included in this issue of *Footprint* study Superstudio, the Italian Radical Architecture group. Ross K. Elfline traces in the group's work the contours of the new post-industrial, information-based society that asserted itself in the subsequent decades; Fernando Quesada follows the status of the object in Superstudio's work, suggesting that the Italians offered an alternative to the two prevailing relations of objects to the environment, as outlined by Argan at the time. Nelson Mota studies a very different type of 'third way' architecture in the early work of Álvaro Siza in Malagueira, which was a participatory project with a unique design process and original response to its context. Michael Müller's contribution to this issue, in turn, studies the contradictions in the work of the artistic avant-garde, namely, its own position within its contemporary mode of production and its relation to economy, as the spheres of culture and economy become evermore interrelated and the individual subject transforms into a hybrid entity whose desire for a unified experience can no longer be resolved.

In the review article 'She Said, He Said', Deborah Fausch returns to the debate between Denise Scott Brown and Kenneth Frampton in the pages of *Casabella* in 1971, a debate that raises questions regarding some of the assumptions of the protagonists concerning 'elitism', 'the people', or the role of architecture and culture in society. Isabelle Doucet reviews a book by architecture-activists BAVO, calling for a form of radical pragmatism instead of the polarity of 'opposition' and 'appeasement'; and Maroš Krivý contributes a review of the exhibition Dreamlands at the Centre Pompidou, suggesting that the exhibition's idolization of a utopia of fun was a missed opportunity to discuss more pressing issues.

Many of these contributions highlight the need for an alternative to the options spelled out in the last decades in architecture - not a 'third way' as coined by Giddens and used and abused by Tony Blair, but a 'radical pragmaticism', as Doucet names it. While Müller, in his diagnosis, outlines the aporia of the current condition of artistic and architectural production, and Doucet searches for a theory, others contribute specific precedents of architectural trajectories that were never followed, ranging from Superstudio's work to Siza's Malagueira. Consequently, the discussion of the 1960s avant-garde and mass culture leads to an understanding of the challenges contemporary architecture faces and to an outlining of concrete alternatives from the recent past.

Notes

1. Haig Beck, '"Elitist!"', *Architectural Design*, vol. XLVI 11/1976, p. 662.
2. For more about populism, see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso: 2005).