

POSITION PAPER

# Autonomy's Ghost and General Education

Simon Sadler\*

1.

Arriving in the US a decade ago as a UK-trained architectural historian, I became more aware than I had been at home of what seemed like a disciplinary split between architectural historians trained as architects—*thinking*, perhaps, as architects—and architectural historians, thinking first and foremost as historians, for whom architecture was not an avocation. Jorge Otero-Pailos's explanation of this cultural divide, which he describes in his *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* from 2010, was revelatory to me. The phenomenological turn in architecture led to nothing less than a redirection of architectural history as a profession, in which architects practicing as historians—'architect-historians', as Otero-Pailos calls them—were found 'staking out a new position ... within the academy as the custodians of architecture's peculiarly ambiguous mode of intellectuality', which is the 'unity of theory and practice' (Otero-Pailos 2010: xiii). Two modes of architectural historical study now co-existed, particularly, it would seem, in the US, uneasily demarcating architect-historians, trained principally as architects, from architectural historians principally steeped in art historical methodology.

'Architect-history' might also be related to the ascent of 'criticality' in architecture. Much as it was possible to study formal affect architecturally (rather than iconographically), it became possible to regard *critical* affect architecturally. Especially post-'68, a 'critical architecture', attended to by what we might ungainly call a 'critical-architect-history', set out from leading schools on the US East Coast to destabilize political, linguistic and environmental hegemonies through architecture. Architecture and architectural history became a quasi-politics, a politics through another medium, working—as per the mandate of 'critical theory' at large—directly on consciousness.

And it happens that an example of such critical-architect-history appeared, again in 2010, in another outstanding addition to the literature around postmodernism: *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again*, by Otero-Pailos's Columbia University colleague Reinhold Martin. The coincidence of two prominent mid-career faculty, in a leading school, publishing on postmodernism in the same year with the same university publisher, presents the reader with an unusual opportunity to study

the cutting edge of thought both on postmodernism and on architect-history, in which profound literacy, deep archival research and acute formal observation converges with practice (such as Otero-Pailos's work as an architectural preservationist and Martin's directorship of the Buell Center for American Architecture at Columbia). Visiting postmodernism at a delay of one or two generations, Martin and Otero-Pailos in turn disavow the recent architectural past, and reconsider it, as though to address again the calling of being an architect, through their tacit—and competing—attempts to recapture for their discipline a measure of autonomy.

The ethical and practical purposiveness undergirding these remarkable 2010 architect-histories are a prompt to deduce the ethics and practice of my more normative and easy-going sense of architectural history. Educated outside the architectural discipline and currently working outside a dedicated architecture department, I tend to see architecture as a syndrome of rather than a cure for what ails society. Whatever the purpose of my employment across programs in a public land grant university, it is remote from the architectural practice, politics, real estate, and intellectual life of Manhattan.

As I'll try to justify here, I think my purpose is to explore the contradictory qualities of architecture that architect-history and architect-criticism help dramatize. I want to talk frankly to students about what design is, rather than what it should be. In particular, I see design as part and parcel of the very political economy it aspires to direct. I make this observation not to debunk design but to exploit it as a dynamic illustration of the perennial contradictions of history at large. Scaled-up, the contradictions and compromises with which designers are bound to wrestle become fables for agency at large, as so many of us—not just designers—try to wring utopia from the unacceptably narrowing mandate for our collective future offered by neoliberalism.

2.

Despite their profound institutional affinities, the books by Martin and Otero-Pailos imply radically different ways of thinking about history and of looking at its buildings, creating a potential dialectic as they struggle for the epistemological foundations of the postmodern and its architecture. Tensions between phenomenology, language and Marxism are still being played out in the history-theory seminar rooms of New York in much the same oblique manner that they were fought (as Otero-Pailos so fascinatingly describes) in the legendary New York journal *Opposi-*

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tions (1973–84). At the risk of over-simplifying their findings, Otero-Pailos portrays postmodern architecture as an introspective *refuge* from political economy, and Martin portrays postmodern architecture as the *accomplice* (but double agent) to political economy.

In *Utopia's Ghost*, Martin explores the fate of politics under the postmodern regime. His intellectual method principally combines the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault to seek out Ernst Bloch's principle of hope in these ugly days of neoliberalism: look hard enough, think hard enough, and another vestigial utopianism, utopian in the proper sense, moves through design, Martin suggests. It is nowhere, but immanent to the system itself. In *Architecture's Historical Turn*, conversely, Otero-Pailos tracks with supreme clarity the sublimation of the political into the phenomenological, watching as men of the left like Kenneth Frampton shored up the 'space of place' through Critical Regionalism, or as politically undeclared figures from Jean Labatut to Charles Moore opened an 'existential space' to politically undeclared Cold War subjects.

At a certain level, then, Otero-Pailos and Martin split the *Gemeinschaft*-systems dialectic (as identified by Alan Colquhoun (Colquhoun 2002: 221)) between them, their narratives growing from one root or the other, rather than in conversation. Otero-Pailos's history privileges the broadly *Gemeinschaft* (community-making) interests of postwar architecture. These were a common concern after the Second World War, present, for instance, in Team X in the 1950s and 1960s. But Team X made them part of a *dialectic* with the incipient systems theories, which are Martin's central concern. Of systems and capital, Otero-Pailos makes no mention, avoiding systemic abstractions of any sort in favor of discourses grounded in intellectual networks, while Martin shows little interest in phenomenology or disciplinary kinship, concentrating attention instead on the circulation of signs.

For Otero-Pailos the postmodern turn was away from modernism's technical advance, primarily understood as the Cartesian abstraction of space and time, back to the supposed roots of human experience recoverable through ontology (Otero-Pailos 2010: xi). If we are to take Martin's project at face value, conversely, it says that the epistemological turn to systems is postmodernism, a stance so ethically irreproachable as to be censorious. He re-reads *Learning from Las Vegas*, for instance, not as an account of Yale students reveling on the Strip, but as a biopolitical scientific instrument (Martin 2010: 6), with little of the charity of the sort registered by Aaron Vinegar's study of the same book, which invited us to pause at the tender sight of Robert Venturi's arm draped around Denise Scott-Brown's shoulder (Vinegar 2008). All sentimentality becomes suspect in Martin's reading. Invoking Adorno's maneuver of condemning all poetry after Auschwitz, Vincent Scully's shingle style is denounced by Martin as an abomination against the backdrop of the Vietnam War (Martin 2010: 41).

Shingles in the age of napalm were paradoxical, and postmodernism did disconnect signs from the real; but if postmodernism is haunted by the utopian, how can we tell when the shingle is functioning as a false consciousness, and not rather beseeching us to return to the ways

of peace and a renewed attention to nature-as-nature? But such hesitant analysis is not the business of these books. Such are their powers of persuasion that the effect of Otero-Pailos's book is to make one say, 'of course. It was all phenomenology'. The effect of reading Martin is to make one say, 'of course. It was all the control society'. Explaining away the drama of these histories as merely 'operative', though (to draw on Manfredo Tafuri's critique of architect-history geared toward current practice Tafuri 1976), would risk woefully underrating their deep archival scholarship and erudition, when we really need to be analyzing the subtlety with which their histories imply a praxis. Where Otero-Pailos's history tentatively finds an architectural truth through materiality and space, Martin's finds an architectural false consciousness in need of historical-materialist criticality.

It is possible then to intuit recommended courses of action correlating with the books' respective emphases—to imagine architectural responses to our postmodern displacements. Postmodernism was so much more complicated than gimcrack pediments and semiotics, these two essential studies tell us, that to think through it historically is to be forced to confront the present. Martin establishes the case for architecture as a type of 'hacktivism', Otero-Pailos for a sort of 'vanguard preservation' (my crude characterizations, not theirs). Place-making would be a natural, somewhat introspect praxis for those architects moved by the work analyzed by Otero-Pailos. For Otero-Pailos, postmodernism in retrospect was something like a utopia-through-caring that diminished the partisan tendencies and overblown discourses typical of avant-gardism, while for Martin, utopia is something that must be *fought* for through designs that disrupt the myth that all is well. (Indeed, Martin seems to be arguing that because the most advanced postmodern projects refused to cohere semantically, they tacitly refused to end modernism: their pastiche was a return of the repressed.) More explicitly, Martin demands that architects focus once again on *housing*, with its deep roots in modernist reformism, which we can reasonably assume he regards as a vantage point for an outward-looking critique of the political-economic *system*.

When architects return to the challenge of housing, it will be to offer, Martin says, 'a *counterdiagram* to that of the camp [in Giorgio Agamben's sense of humans excluded from legal protection] and of the gated enclave' (Martin 2010: 26). The housing type which will awaken architects will be insistently *public* (not public / private, not affordable, not sustainable, but collective), clarifying the distinction between what is real in architecture and what is not (Martin 2010: 147). Otero-Pailos's praxis is less explicit—his book is a lucid history, Martin's is a series of confounding essays based around history—but can probably be intuited from the gutsy disdain with which he describes the second generation of US phenomenologists emerging in the wake of 1968 and the poststructuralism of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, who undermined or at least modified Sartrean existentialism. Now in powerful positions of seniority (including at these authors' home base of Columbia

University), the second generation of US phenomenologists turned against the pastoral, subject-centering possibilities of phenomenology, so that in an apparent reversal of phenomenology's promise, deconstruction started to stand for the opposite: no authenticity, no stable experience, no stable history, appropriating the 'impossibility-of-dwelling' arguments presented by Theodor Adorno and adopted by Francesco Dal Co.

Indeed, postmodern architecture gave us the 'architect as a professional melancholic' (Martin 2010: 148), as Martin reminds us. Yet one thing that seems almost willfully absent in these fresh accounts of postmodernism is why an earlier generation of architects caved in to a sort of pragmatism about design's capacity to steer the behemoth of modernization. Willful, because this new wave of architect-history, despairing against the withdrawal of a preceding postmodern generation and rightly troubled by the degeneration of civil society since, tacitly revive the sense that architects have privileged insight into predicaments of Being and political economy (predicaments that actually beset us all). But despite its titanic ability to help us understand totality (a totality that includes Otero-Pailos's phenomenological postmodernism on the one hand, and Martin's historical materialist postmodernism on the other), architecture and its histories require a certain theoretical modesty and realism. Vitiated by circumstance, architecture offers only weak moral or political guidance or capacity to prompt the massive change which would otherwise seem to be the domain of the architectural medium. Architecture mostly produces and reproduces its era, including its circumstantial wrinkles and contradictions. In this it is all too much like the grind of politics at large rather than a substitute for it.

Utopia's ghost is still present in architecture, as Martin shows, and so too, in these books, are the ghosts of architecture's belief in its own autonomy and vanguardism. Hence perhaps the lacuna in the books about the actual business of architecture—its tuition fees, academic appointments, capital, and clients. The books imply instead that form, language, thought and projects are architecture's core business—a hangover of autonomy and vanguardism. I don't think that is their authors' intention at all—in many ways, Otero-Pailos pulls back the curtain on academic politics, while Martin is absolutely correct to draw our attention to the constituent part that language and representation plays in oppression, thus combining poststructuralism with Marxism. His insistence in *Utopia's Ghost* that housing is the soul of architecture is a level-headed way of addressing something tangible to the poor. Still, that project celebrates modern architecture's traditional competence, which is progressive reformism: working with what *is*. And this renews the main challenge of all sincere bourgeois reformism, which is finding meaningful alliances and constituencies in the populace. What will then start to matter more than the means (architecture) will be the politics (resources, organization, and so on), at which point architecture's already *relative* powers of autonomy and leadership are diluted still further.

Both books claim to be about expansive and even global discourse but are preoccupied with immediate predeces-

sors and colleagues, mostly male and white, in an axis barely longer than the four hour drive from Cornell to Princeton. That doesn't chime with the wide social webs to which contemporary progressive politics are now appealing. Otero-Pailos rearranges the nodal points of American academic architecture's discursive net, but the field over which that net is thrown is mostly familiar. Martin memorably describes power and discourse 'topologically', and yet he can step out of that topology seemingly at will—how else would his critique of it be possible? Such is the ghost of autonomy. Bold in their declination to flatter senior colleagues on promotion committees, the authors nonetheless remain loyal to architecture itself, placing it front and center of contemporary history: in pointing out its past mistakes, they imply that those mistakes can be learned from, corrected, so that we might yet design a better day. Systemic self-regulation indeed.

These histories save architecture from external threats *and* from itself. Let it be said that such coruscating self-criticism is one of the discipline's most remarkable and admirable traditions—can we imagine any other profession (say, law or medicine) doing the same? But it possibly limits the books' audiences mostly to architects rather than to students of postmodernism at large, for whom Grey and White are just colors. And thus Martin is able to make sense of his tenure in the system of architecture of which his critique is so rigorous: 'with architecture's help, we might yet discover postmodernism's paradoxical modernity' (Martin 2010: 92). Martin works deftly to rescue the best postmodern architects, like John Hejduk and Aldo Rossi, from the ignominy that his critique otherwise heaps upon them; even Léon Krier gets a pass as a utopian, at least until Martin notes that Krier's utopianism was so over-determined that he bears comparison not with the ghosts of utopia but to Albert Speer. Despite Martin's unflinching criticism of Peter Eisenman as playing into the very linguistic environment from which he thought he was reclaiming architectural autonomy, their mutual interest in the project for autonomy in architecture, their shared concern to keep architecture as a product of agency rather than 'environment', keeps Martin and Eisenman talking to one another (literally).

The tacit importance of architectural autonomy is underscored by Martin's relentless criticism of any breach of the *art* of architecture, a criticism bordering on a bad faith toward so many historical figures who imagined themselves doing good through the populist deployment of architecture—listing figures who would in any universe other than architect-history be most surprised to find themselves keeping one another's company, such as Denise Scott Brown and Richard Buckminster Fuller, jointly accused of selling out design to the domestication of science (Martin 2010: 36–7). Architecture is wished-for as an island of reason, authorship, critique and ontological insight amid the ecology of systems, networks and codes which, as Martin relates so disturbingly, undergird the faceless, post-humanist and often violent processes of modernization and globalization. In the same way that Martin's analysis groups together some odd architectural bedfellows, so it does some odd political bedfellows—

since Noam Chomsky privileged syntax over semantics, for example, he can be connected to Marshall McLuhan, who delinked the medium from the message, and to Richard Nixon, who delinked the dollar from the gold standard. Epistemologically, cybernetics in this account fundamentally equates with evolutionary biology, which equates with free-market capitalism; all things are interchangeable, without categorical difference—a vision of the total system worthy of the Santa Fe Institute itself.

Where to stop? I wonder whether it would be possible to acknowledge these broad ideological, institutional and epistemological patterns and fallacies, yes—but only as part of the enduring story of an architectural discipline ever-imblicated in modernization; ever part of the web, ever at risk of speaking the dialectic of Enlightenment, ever subject to language games, ever part of the general bourgeois reformism which anticipated a stable social system with total technological control over the environment, and which somehow incorporated the dream of endless affluence too. This condition—or tragedy—taken as read, we can begin to seek out its nuances and contradictions as well. Rather than homogenize postmodernism into an Ouroboros to be succeeded by a relentless deconstruction, it might be worth probing postmodernism, Yet Again, for the contradictions which, I am sure, are inherent to all efforts to create architecture. The historical personalities of these books are worth reading about *because* they were trying to wring out the potential of architectural design as practice and contemplative object. There are some interesting politics buried in architectural phenomenology (as Otero-Pailos intimates) and even in that ultimate systems bogey of cybernetics. Systems were another architecture, collusive with, and yet *enquiring* of, the broader force of modernizing history—much like regular architecture, an apparatus that reproduces the struggle to manufacture the world and yet change it.

Design's relentless contradictions—inherent to its wrestling with totality, whether it wants to or not—are the main source of my own fascination with modern architectural history. I admire and assign these books because I find them *both* persuasive, even though they somewhat contradict one another, as they trace, from the loftiest vantage points of the discipline, the different 'strata' of architectural experience and political economy (Otero-Pailos describing the existential affect that can be wrenched by architecture from the abyss of capital and language denounced by Martin). But I'd also like to restore the missing dialectical tension between them. The political and the phenomenological co-existed for some post-war historians and architects, especially those trained in Italy; Vittorio Gregotti, Giancarlo de Carlo, Aldo Rossi, and so forth started to de-emphasize phenomenology in favor of Frankfurt School Marxism, but were therefore immersed in both schools of thought, as neo-Marxism itself explored the deepening existential contradictions of capitalism which (I am reminded in these books) were imported into architecture by the likes of Frampton and Colquhoun.

Ultimately, I am unconvinced that design as we know it is capable of reconciling societal or existential contra-

dictions and that, as long as it doesn't deepen them, it's a largely pragmatic practice—straddling the line between instrumentalism and critique, technique and humanism. Architecture services capital while trying to extract from it aesthetic or public value. Architecture's graduate schools at once accommodate an elite design 'one per cent' *and* a universalist Habermasian coffee house with a 'free press'—the public sphere under a bell jar.

### 3.

My own bell jar—a large public university for the five per cent, shall we say—is bigger, and more brittle. Yet I tend to think of universities as a whole as design schools scaled-up, complete with their designs on society, some of them brazenly positivist, some brazenly critical, a few quietly utopian, many rather quaint. (Where better to conceive of a world after neoliberalism than in an institution born before neoliberalism, though many university managers are dismissive of that fact?) As design is scaled-up to the university at large, so too are the contradictions of design scaled up, so it is didactically good for students to observe in microcosm the travails of Manhattanite architectural practices faced with a complex and a contradictory reality. Despite design's aspirations to 'be' politics, by 'hacking' consciousness, it is hostage to its present. It is less a 'way out' than a 'way in' to the facts of life. And in this is its object lesson in the possibility and limitations of agency. As an art of compromise, architectural design above all dramatizes and clarifies our conundrums. While architect-history sets out to shore up the role of a cadre of architecture, a more normative architectural history can shore up a political constituency *for* architecture, supportive of that discipline's dreams of a transparent, humane and critical decision-making capable of thinking through the contradictions that constitute the whole. The monumental clarity with which architects can assume positions that historians can in turn describe to a wider public are vital for the pedagogical model which is my lot. Astounded, I suspect, at the confidence with which architecture eventually asserts agency in a world seemingly resistant to it, general-education students of architectural history can be trained to think and see across different registers and across different strategies for negotiating our relationship with political economy and nature.

While there is perhaps a certain obscenity in the belief that design and design scholarship can do much about the world, given the depth of its problems, there is yet something profoundly heartening about design's *will* to reform that resonates with any undergraduate, whether they're based in a studio or in a library or in a laboratory. It is the concision and concreteness of design that makes it an exemplary tool for pedagogy: design lends *form* to our concerns. As the designs of Western political states are dismantled, returning their societies to something essentially pre-New Deal, or pre-welfare state, and in some ways pre-democratic, perhaps eventually making them pre-modern (rather than postmodern), architectural design is revealed as a hold-out of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reform, at its core still pursuing a liberal political hermeneutics (worrying about how to fix the public realm

and discover common concerns, usually through unlikely alliances, with capitalism itself if needs be).

But what analytical method to bring to that tangle of which architecture is a part? Martin enters into a *pas de deux* with anthropologist Bruno Latour, a thinker who—as famously apolitical as he can seem, because of his preference for messy social, material and representational networks over binaries of left / right, true / untrue—has to be of interest to any historian, like Martin, critical of the dialectical impasse of straight Marxism. When he reads Venturi Scott Brown's Princeton laboratory as a Latourian 'architecture' of science, for instance, Martin draws our attention back to architecture's *reality*, its organizing role in social and epistemological relations. Architecture is the missing metaphysics of Latour's system, Martin notes (Martin 2010: 87). Not only is real architecture involved in the organizational network Latour studies; Latour himself is an 'architect'—the metaphysician, the custodian, convening the parliament of things, the space in which we perceive the quasi-object of networks. Latour's Science and Technology Studies, then, is one neighboring discipline with which a general architectural history will likely continue to converse. Otero-Pailos meanwhile advocates a method he terms 'polygraphy'—a neat pun on forensic investigation that captures the plurality of literary sources explored—which looks at architecture not by close geographical or temporal proximity but through intellectual history (Otero-Pailos 2010: 4 *passim*). This method is necessary because postmodernism was, Otero-Pailos explains, a consolidation of various processes from the 1940s to the '70s which have been prematurely synthesized by historians. The method, reminiscent of social history and discourse analysis, again aids architectural historians seeking expanded methods.

To what department does an expanded, generalist architectural history belong? Whereas architect-history brought history closer to architecture departments, an architectural history addressing the totality to which architecture connects roams the campus looking for its audience. In terms of employment, frankly, the certified architect-historian has an advantage, as canny deans of architecture increasingly seek 'twofers' that can teach in the studio as well as seminar room. As it develops away from plain visual culture, meanwhile, architectural history is ever less at home in art history programs. Ideally, though, an expanded architectural history can take advantage of its lack of domicile by reaching out to general education. If Martin's clarion call is for architects to refocus on the public good of housing in the face of the starchi-

ture's neoliberal unreality, general education might be architectural history's antidote to the unreality of managerial 'excellence' in the university at large, as it strives to brand academics as TED-ready stars.

Perhaps the university itself, as an institutional architecture as well as a built one, through which utopia's ghost yet moves, should be taught as a core typology alongside the villa and the mosque and the housing project. Such a general or expanded architectural history is probably best weighted to the less glamorous end of higher education—undergraduates in public universities like my own—helping new students correlate their enticing new architect-designed dormitories and sports stadia to the student debt crisis that will be a possible cause of the next economic crash. The university is an uncertain friend to the working- and middle-class student, the university's allegiance split (like architecture's) between Enlightenment and profit.

Two sizes of bell jar for the thought-experiments of architectural history, then—one smaller and thicker, containing an architect-history for architects, the other a little bigger and thinner for general education students. Is that all I am describing? Sigh. I suppose so, but hopefully en route to something a little more ambitious. The raciest of all postmodern Manhattanite architect-historians urged us to think across scales—S, M, L, XL—from the nook to the transnational capital flow (Koolhaas 1995). His ambition was to redouble architecture's public power, and I would like to see the same for the public clout of architectural history. Bigger bell jars for bigger simulations of the public sphere, with architectural history all-too-like the architectural discipline it describes. Not because architectural history should necessarily return us to the essential truths of architectural apperception, but because it can alert us to the 'critical' collusions from which we try to extract reform.

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