Accounting for autonomy: Locating architecture in the exhibitions of Herzog & de Meuron and OMA-AMO

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Abstract

The very first years of the twenty-first century saw two internationally recognised architecture firms, Herzog & de Meuron and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) - in collaboration with its mirror image AMO - mount somewhat unconventional exhibitions of their respective work. Fundamentally, these exhibitions operated on a similar premise, this being the display of what we might traditionally think of as architectural ‘process work’ in a gallery setting. Both ‘Herzog & de Meuron: Archaeology of the Mind’ and OMA-AMO’s ‘Content’ included material tests and study models, amongst other archived objects of architectural problem-solving and experimentation that typically form an essential part of the realisation of architectural projects but that usually remain unseen by those outside of the project teams working on them.

While both exhibitions attempted to reposition architectural process work as exhibition material in a gallery setting, they also appeared to represent divergent concepts of architecture’s relationship to (and autonomy from) culture and society at large. Through precise conceptual frameworks, these unusual exhibitions seemed to define quite specific relationships between their architectural work and the fine arts (‘Archaeology of the Mind’) or society and culture at large (‘Content’). The following paper argues instead that the exhibitions and critical content of the detailed catalogues that accompanied them were actually revealing the limitations of locating architecture in the 21st C by way of traditional notions of autonomy or integration.

The paper makes a case for identifying both exhibitions’ positions on architecture’s disciplinary status as a potential theoretical end-game for the interrogation of architectural autonomy undertaken by Italian ‘radical’ architects during the 1960s and 70s, which in turn made use of Autonomist-
Marxist political theory. In ‘Content’ and ‘Archaeology of the Mind’ thirty years later elements of this theory (devoid of the same political content) appear latent in both Herzog & de Meuron and OMA-AMO’s approaches to understanding the disciplinary status of architecture through in the exhibition of their work.

Herzog & de Meuron’s Fragmented Cabinet
‘Herzog & de Meuron: Archaeology of the Mind’ opened at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) in October 2002. Process work by the firm was displayed alongside natural science objects, historically significant works of craft, and key pieces of twentieth century art. These objects were grouped according to an idiosyncratic and predominantly formal language, as opposed to recognised disciplinary or even chronologically-derived categories. The importance of these groupings was underlined in the substantial exhibition publication, Herzog & de Meuron: A Natural History, and the press releases that accompanied the exhibition. Here, images of Dan Graham’s Girls’ Make-up Room installation (1998-2000) and a Japanese net float are shown alongside study models for Herzog & de Meuron’s New Link Quay project in Santa Cruz de Tenerife and self portraits by Andy Warhol. Chinese scholar rocks share pages with sketches for the firm’s Marktplatz proposal in Basel and fossil collections from the Musée de Séminaire de Sherbrooke.¹ In positioning architectural process work alongside such objects, ‘Archaeology of the Mind’ made use of two clear conceptual devices – the archaeological dig and the cabinet of curiosities or wunderkammer.

Key to these devices was a choreographed degree of distance from the objects on display in relation both to the viewer and the architects themselves. While Herzog & de Meuron was responsible for the design of the display cabinets that housed the process work and smaller objects, Philip Ursprung, as curator ‘devised the rules of the game’.² As the exhibition title suggests, the work on display was conceived as the contents of a sort of archaeological site, creating an imaginary and exaggerated temporal gap between the execution of the work and its display.

For the purposes of this exhibition we imagined we were archaeologists from the future who came across hundreds of models in the Herzog & de Meuron archive without knowing what they meant. So we arranged the models according to formal and morphological criteria. We set them out so as to
suggest links. We set them in the context of works of art, craft objects, ethnology, books, photographs, toys and other things.³

Looking back on the work from this imagined future perspective provides the basis for the freedom from traditional disciplinary categories in the exhibition as a way of legitimising the exhibition of the process work. Also at stake in this conceptual archaeological device are the potential relationships between this work and the other objects or, more broadly, architecture and the arts and sciences.

The second structuring device for the exhibition, in the wunderkammer, is only briefly mentioned by Herzog & de Meuron at the end of their catalogue essay ‘Just Waste’.⁴ Although the cabinet of curiosities is written about just once explicitly, the image of the cabinet is repeated across the catalogue in William Burgess’ secretary cabinet, images of the Joanneum Museum in Graz and Giorgio Sommer’s museum photographs from Pompeii.⁵

The significance of the wunderkammer for ‘Archaeology of the Mind’ relates again to this notion of avoiding strict disciplinary or contextual categorisation. The history of the cabinet as categorical loophole and vehicle for inter-disciplinary interaction extends back to the sixteenth century, but was most prevalent in the nineteenth century following the rise of the natural history museum and the eighteenth century arrangement of the arts. More recently in the early twentieth century, Alexander Dorner and El Lizzitsky’s Abstract Cabinet worked to obscure notions of the individual object, as well as boundaries between art disciplines and media, architecture and advertising.⁶ In effect, ‘Archaeology of the Mind’ attempts to make use of the same conceptual device in understanding architecture as a legitimate part of a (somewhat historical concept of) system of arts and sciences representing spheres of knowledge outside of any one particular context or period.⁷

The cabinet represents, like the archaeological dig, a way of distancing oneself from the exhibited works. However, here the distance operates in a more-forward-facing manner. The wunderkammer assumes that little is known about the objects and their relation to each other but, unlike the dig, the cabinet’s contents would typically be specimens too recently ‘discovered’ to be integrated into existing categories. In both cases, the work itself is removed from its context and placed in an imagined future or present situation where each object’s disciplinary status and origins are or have become obscured.
While the objects presented as part of ‘Archaeology of the Mind’ were removed from their disciplinary and chronological context through their display groupings, both ‘dig’ and ‘cabinet’ scenarios appear to collapse in the written work surrounding the exhibition. Writing by Herzog & de Meuron and the exhibition team of Ursprung and Kurt Forster in the catalogue reveal an unavoidable closeness to the objects. Inside the gallery, for the duration of the exhibition, the objects resisted disciplinary categories, but for the record, in writing and according to the architects themselves, the firm’s process works were separated as ‘accumulated waste’ or ‘waste products’ in the presence of ‘real works of art’ or ‘genuine objects’.8

**OMA-AMO’s Real Marketplace**

Approximately a year after the opening of ‘Archaeology of the Mind’, OMA-AMO’s exhibition ‘Content’, opened at the *Neue Nationalgalerie* in Berlin. The exhibition focused on the groups’ activities in the years following the publication of *S, M, L, XL* in 1995. It presented a range of documents and artefacts, spanning from study models and formal experiments through to completed project models that captured OMA-AMO’s interest in the tension between highly speculative and realised projects. Work by the firms was set up to interact with multimedia, photographic and film-based artwork by Tony Oursler, Candida Höfer and Jeff Priess.9

The exhibition layout was ‘themed’, but not ordered. The work on display weaved through, sat on top of and completely covered a series of dividing walls, plinths and boxes, creating a chaotic and full image of the firms’ work and interests at turn of the twenty-first century. Unlike the controlled, internal systematisation of ‘Archaeology of the Mind’, the work in ‘Content’ appeared to run riot in the exhibition space, confronting its audience at every turn with a seemingly endless amount of material that highlighted complex relationships across the work and its socio-cultural situation.

Here again, the exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue containing a significant amount of critical material. However, whereas *A Natural History* contained catalogued images of the material on display interspersed between critical essays and a history of the firm’s work, the *Content* catalogue took the form of a glossy magazine-cum-book, complete with full-page advertisements and loud graphic design work. A large part of the catalogue’s content plays on the irony surrounding the brand-value of contemporary
architecture through faux t-shirt designs, mock patents, as well as contentious images, slogans and pop culture references.\(^\text{10}\)

If in ‘Archaeology of the Mind’, Herzog & de Meuron’s concept of architecture seemed timeless, universal and devoid of any specific context, for OMA and AMO in ‘Content’, architecture could be none of these things. \textit{Content} as a document makes a claim for architecture as a socially-engaged practice inextricably linked to its immediate context. As part of the catalogue introduction, OMA director Rem Koolhaas contrasts this understanding of architecture with a more traditional view, rejecting ‘a fuzzy amalgamation of ancient knowledge and contemporary practice... an inadequate medium to operate in it’ in favour of ‘a discipline that represents relationships, proportions, connections, effects, the diagram of everything’.\(^\text{11}\)

In part, ‘Content’ and its catalogue in particular can also be read as an exploration of the process that saw the creation of AMO, an examination of what Koolhaas sees as ‘the maximum stretch between two opposite forces, realisation and speculation’.\(^\text{12}\) This understanding of architectural output, and of the work displayed as part of ‘Content’ more specifically, underlined the presence of complex connections and relationships between this work and wider social, political and economic forces. The difference between speculation and realisation of projects can be attributed largely these wider forces and their impact on the ability or desire to realise work. The ambivalence involved in working between these two poles inevitably takes this wider context into account with regard to the pull between what \textit{should} happen according to a given architect’s opinion and what \textit{could} happen in relation to such wider conditions.

In terms of an identifiable exhibition framework, ‘Content’ was, on a number of levels, a market. A market as bazaar-type structure at work in the exhibition appeared physically in the exhibition format and layout, as well as across the work’s broader understanding of the discipline. Encased by Mies’ glazed warehouse emblazoned with the ‘Content’ logo, the exhibition seemed over-full with a wide variety of collected objects - objects that had already formed relationships with the world before finding their way to the ‘Content’ bazaar.\(^\text{13}\)

The work could also be seen as linked to a wider and less tangible concept of \textit{financial} markets. In this sense, OMA-AMO’s definition of architecture sees the discipline as increasingly reliant and intertwined with the same sorts of factors and networks as capital
markets. Arguably, this relationship partially relates to a longer view of late-capitalist expansion, but also the specific context for the exhibition objects. The work in ‘Content’ took place over the seven-year period prior to the exhibition opening, a period which saw both the inflation and burst of the ‘Dot-Com’ bubble and 9/11. The volatility of the world’s financial markets echoed the social instability that characterised these events. As an exhibition and a document, ‘Content’, in arguing for architecture as essentially a thought process in relation to a particular context, was also arguing for a concept of architecture just as relentlessly unpredictable as its time.

Radical Architectural Autonomy since the 1960s

The centrality of architectural autonomy to both ‘Archaeology of the Mind’ and ‘Content’ can be read partly in relation to the contemporaneous writings and debates on post-critical architecture, but also (and perhaps more productively) to positions on architectural autonomy that emerged during the 1960s and 70s. Concepts of architectural autonomy during this period were crucial to understanding architecture in relation to emerging technologies and the restructuring of disciplinary boundaries and traditions. Typically, accounts of this period and architecture’s ‘crisis’ or ‘post-modern turn’ outline key concepts of autonomy through a familiar pattern of key figures and well-known oppositions. At its most basic level, and while acknowledging the range of approaches across their respective works, an autonomy-integration axis is often explained in English work through the American debates of Eisenman, Hejduk and other ‘whites’ read in opposition to Venturi, Stern and the ‘grays’. The importance of the Italian situation to this discourse is then covered through the work or Rossi and the words of Tafuri, with a passing nod to the paper architecture of architettura radicale.

This recognised understanding of the period would then theoretically place the later exhibitions of Herzog & de Meuron in line with a thread that passes from 1960s and 70s the autonomy-integration, white-gray axis as we have come to understand it, through the development of third-way positions like Hays’ ‘critical architecture’, and up to the turn-of-the-century ‘resuscitation’ of architecture and emergence of ‘post-critical’/‘post-theory’ positions of figures like Michael Speaks, Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting. This basic sketch of architectural autonomy since the 1960s accounts for the presence of autonomy and integration as a central theme for both ‘Archaeology of the Mind’ and ‘Content’, yet it does not seem to reveal much about each exhibition’s specific relationship to these concepts as it might at first appear to.
To attempt an investigation of each exhibition’s understanding of architecture at the beginning of the 21st C, a closer look at the Italian situation may prove useful. Undoubtedly, Tafuri and Rossi’s respective work is crucial to concepts of architectural autonomy and the discipline’s role in late capitalist society that emerged during the 1960s and 70s. Briefly, Tafuri can be thought of as responsible for outlining the critical limitations of the discipline in the production of realised built form, while Rossi’s work in both theory and practice represented a concept of architecture as a closed, critical practice of form and locus in opposition to the emerging architectural network-based theories. Yet if we were to limit our understanding of the Italian discourse on architectural autonomy during this period to only Tafuri and Rossi alongside the American terms of the debate, this would tempt an all-too-convenient understanding of OMA-AMO and Herzog & de Meuron’s exhibitions as poles on an autonomy-integration axis.

Such an axis, and its triangulation though resultant ‘third-way’ theories (including, but not limited to Ambasz’s critical participation and K Michael Hays’ critical architecture), presents somewhat limited opportunities for understanding architecture in a more contemporary setting, following the discipline’s post-modern turn and subsequent commercialisation. Instead, this paper proposes that a closer look at the inherently Marxian positions that informed much of the work coming out of Italy during the 1960s and 70s, including those of Tafuri and Rossi, but also importantly the loosely associated work of architettura radicale, may have the potential to reveal much more about the recent architectural exhibitions discussed.

Much of the ‘radical’ architectural work to be exhibited around the end of the 1960s through to the mid-1970s claimed for itself, explicitly or otherwise, a connection to Operaist (and later Autonomist) theory. The political theory of Mario Tronti in particular, presented architects, especially those associated with architettura radicale who operated at the edge of recognised architectural practice, with possibilities for understanding the precise nature of architecture’s relationship to wider capitalist forces. In this case, the terms of the debate shifted from autonomy versus integration toward a more complex understanding of autonomy in relation to power through concepts of refusal and infiltration.

Key to this understanding of autonomy is Tronti’s notion of the refusal of work as a means of obtaining power, rather than thinking simply in terms of autonomy through directly oppositional strategies. This type of oppositional autonomy, according to Tronti and in the
context of workers against capitalist forces, strengthens not only the dependence of the entity seeking autonomy on that which it opposes, but further, reinforces the dominance of the latter.

A new form of antagonism must instil itself in working class science, bending this science towards new ends, and then transcending it in the totally political act of practice. The form we refer to is the form of the struggle of refusal, the form of organisation of the working class "No": the refusal to collaborate actively in capitalist development, the refusal to put forward positively programme of demands.22

For Tronti, the continual struggle of the working class against capitalism, the very demonstrations and demands of the workers in opposition to this dominant force, was ultimately and continually a source of strength for capitalism. Each demonstration gave capitalism an opportunity to re-structure and formulate a response – the workers’ existing struggle for autonomy was, for Tronti, forcing their complete reliance on that from which they were seeking freedom. The strategy of refusal advocated a form of autonomy related to understanding the power inherent in the working class. According to Tonti’s theory, a large part of the problem with the existing relationship between the working class and the capitalists could be attributed to the fact that the working class were unaware that they (as the source of production) held the power in a capitalist system.

Tronti also advocated the use of party politics to bring about political change, that is, the ability to act within but yet against a given system. This mode of operation in some ways seems contradictory to the notion of refusal, but in fact highlights a key element of the Italian philosopher’s thinking – namely, that identifying and understanding the power structure inherent in the relationship between opposing positions provides the opportunity to critically intervene critically in this relationship. Importantly, the possession of power in a given relationship does not necessarily result in dominance.

Tronti’s theories formed a central part of much of the Operaist work taken up by many of the groups thought of as belonging to architettura radicale during this period. At work within the architecturally-based experiments and happenings of groups like Superstudio, Archizoom, UFO, Gruppo Strum and 9999 were concepts of political and disciplinary refusal, as well as engagement with recognised technological and aesthetic systems in order to oppose their perceived misuse.23 This uptake of political theory by architecture in
the context of the social and political struggles of the period represents an important moment for concepts of architectural autonomy. The changes that these theories underwent when confronted with the aesthetic role of the discipline and the unclear political status of architectural work reveal an attempt to understand and describe the possibilities for critical architectural work outside of an axial autonomy-integration theoretical framework.

Architecture After Autonomy and Integration

The work of OMA-AMO and Herzog & de Meuron thirty years later in ‘Content’ and Archaeology of the Mind’ suggests an ‘end game’ of sorts for consideration of architecture as a discipline in traditional autonomy-based terms. If we consider both ‘Content’ and ‘Archaeology of the Mind’ as examples of non-traditional architectural work that examine the status of architecture as a discipline in relation to its context, then it is certainly possible to see the work as part of a longer thread that includes architettura radicale and thus Tronti, even if by some degrees of separation. Bearing this in mind, the central role of autonomy in the conceptual frameworks of these exhibitions is able to be understood less simply as poles on an autonomy-integration axis, but more productively as comments on the complex negotiations and exchanges between architecture as a discipline and traditional aesthetic and socio-political and economic systems.

Rather than seeing ‘Archaeology of the Mind’ as describing an aesthetic autonomy for architecture in the company of the fine arts and natural sciences, or ‘Content’ as advocating a contextually-driven architecture networked to social, political and economic conditions, we can perhaps instead understand both exhibitions as pointing to the inability for architecture to be either of these things by the beginning of the century. Both exhibitions ask more complex questions of the discipline that play out as somewhat Trontian/’radical’ concepts of refusal and critical engagement with established systems, devoid of explicitly Marxian political aspirations, but instead with the view to maintaining a critical contemporary architecture in the face of the discipline’s more recent level of commercialisation.

The unattainability of either autonomy or integration for architecture is underlined by the written material that accompanied the exhibitions. The concept of the archaeological dig and the wunderkammer that informed Herzog & de Meuron’s architecture exhibition relied to an extent on the suspension of recognised disciplinary categories (dig) and the presumed value of the objects on display (cabinet). Both of these positions appear
untenable in any written discussion of the work, where architecture is recognised as ‘other’ – an intruder, despite all implied distance and the exhibition’s location at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA).

The catalogue and written material relating to OMA-AMO’s ‘Content’ undermines the exhibition’s conceptual framework in a similar way. The notion of architecture as a product of the wider social, political and economic conditions of a given moment appears less-straight-forward when McGetrick suggests that ‘Content is, beyond all, a tribute to what are perhaps OMA-AMO’s greatest virtues – its courage, its dogged, almost existential pursuit of discomfort, its commitment to engaging with the world by inviting itself to places where it has no authority, places where it doesn’t “belong”’.

Architecture then is not at home in the wider context of the 21st century, but remains an outsider by virtue of its aesthetic ties, its reliance on speculation even when dependant on external forces for realisation. Integration of architecture into the realm of ‘the real’ thus remains problematic in terms of the discipline’s ability to have any real power or clear role to play. Koolhaas saw the creation of AMO as an opportunity to ‘create knowledge independent of chance and pursue our own interests in parallel to those of our clients’, suggesting that AMO was to operate outside not only the traditional limits of architecture through research projects, but also the traditional commission-based mode of production. Despite this, the status of AMO’s work remains unclear. AMO is at times treated as a branch of OMA and part of the ‘speculation’ pull of architectural practice, while at other times the work is explicitly understood as ‘non-architectural’, drawing a distinct boundary for the contemporary discipline.

OMA-AMO and Herzog & de Meuron’s unravelled exhibition frameworks share strategic ground with Tronti in their critical engagement with recognised systems. The undermined notions of integration and autonomy for architecture in ‘Content’ and ‘Archaeology of the Mind’ created the opportunity for the exhibitions’ realisation and the opportunity for their challenging of these same concepts. The process work of each firm confronted moments of authenticity and intrusion in order to understand opportunities for engagement and refusal in contemporary architectural work. The study models and experiments refused to be ‘finished’, while engaging with the systems that typically belong to completed work (whether this work is realised or not).
This paper has not attempted to suggest Autonomist-Marxist agendas in the exhibitions of Herzog & de Meuron and OMA-AMO, but rather that the uptake of political theory in the 1960s and 70s by architettura radicale imbued architectural discourse with inherently Autonomist-Marxist strategies that, thirty years later, were informing the disciplinary strategies of work at the edge of recognised architectural practice. This more recent exhibition-based work can no longer be read productively in terms of the white-gray, autonomy-integration axis that has historically dominated discussions relating to architectural autonomy.

Endnotes

1 Philip Ursprung (ed). Herzog & de Meuron: A Natural History, (Montréal, Québec: Canadian Centre for Architecture; Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller, 2002), 366-81, 84-7.
2 Philip Ursprung (ed). Herzog & de Meuron: A Natural History, 37.
5 Philip Ursprung (ed). Herzog & de Meuron: A Natural History, 186-8.
8 Herzog & de Meuron, ‘Just Waste’, 74
9 Oursler’s work was a multimedia installation based on Koolhaas’s ‘Junkspace’ text, Priess’s film was entitled ‘The Embassy’ and Höfer’s photographs were of the Duth Embassy in Berlin.
10 Rem Koolhaas, Office for Metropolitan Architecture et al (eds.). Content, (Cologne: Taschen, 2004).
13 Kayako Ota, and AMO curator, describes ‘Content’ as a ‘flea market’ in a recent article for Log. Kayayko Ota. ‘Curating as Architectural Practice’, in Log 20 (Fall) 2010, 143.
Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting. ‘Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism’ Perspecta 33 (2002), 72-77.


20 For example, see events like the 14th and 15th Triennali di Milano and the ‘New Domestic Landscape exhibition’ at MOMA.

21 The term architettura radicale is typically applied to Italian groups like Superstudio, UFO, 9999, Archizoom, ZZigurat and Gruppo Strum; as well as individuals like Ugo la Pietra, Ettore Sottsass Jr., Gaetano Pesce, and Gianni Petena.


24 Brian McGetrick in Rem Koolhaas, Office for Metropolitan Architecture et al (eds.). Content, 16.


26 OMA, ‘Content’, viewed 01 March 2011.