

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH DUTCH ARCHITECTURE, ARCHITECTS AND THE CITY

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Joan Ockman, writing in 2000 on the occasion of the last issue of *Assemblage*, pointed out that the production of architectural theory occurs in cycles, which somehow parallel economic and financial crises. If the emphasis on textual analysis and architectural language in the 70s coincided with the 1975 crash, the early 1990s, in the midst of the crisis of the building industry, saw the rise of an increasing interest in authors like Deleuze, and topics around identity politics and postcolonial studies. In the early 2000s, faith in the redemptive capacities of digital technologies and in the self-regulatory properties of the market accompanied a decline in the interest for architectural theory, and the post-critical wave's motto became "theory was interesting, but now we have work." (Speaks, 2002)

Following the same line of reasoning, it is possible to note that the 2008 mortgage crisis brought about a new cycle of theoretical production. The crisis meant that for many architects work was no longer there, and a series of new experiences in architectural research practices emerged. However, the post-2008 condition probably marked some structural changes in the organisation of architectural production that go beyond the usual ebbs and flows in the trends of architectural discourse.

Since its "invention" in the Renaissance, architecture has always been an intellectual endeavour. Abstractions and logical operations are at the core of the process of design, and the first architects were actively engaged in the systematisation and dissemination of architectural knowledge. But if architects have always been involved in "immaterial" production besides the materiality of building practice, the idea of architectural research is rather new and escapes linear definitions and historical reconstructions (Fraser, 2013)

The urge to define architectural research today emerges from very practical reasons. Architecture does not figure as an autonomous discipline in the taxonomy of the European Commission's research

frameworks. Scholars in architecture are forced to submit their research proposals as works of history, engineering or social sciences, and their proposals will unlikely be evaluated by architects. Thus, the definition of architectural research is not just an academic curiosity, but a necessary step to ensure recognition and the possible allocation of research funding into architecture.

Yet, design research is not confined to academia. Reports of professional organisations such as AIA (2013) and RIBA (Till, 2008) testify the urgency of defining the status of architectural research in professional circles. In the RIBA report, written by Jeremy Till, architecture research is described as an activity meant to "gain knowledge and understanding" and to make them readily available through their effective dissemination. Beyond the self-referentiality of academic practices and research-by-design formulas, the RIBA report suggests an alliance between academics and practitioners in which architectural research should take the form of an "*archaeology* of the processes of architectural production."

Till's suggestion was further developed in a 2009 RIBA publication titled "The Future for Architects," written in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which mapped the situation of architectural practice in the UK and sketched some hypotheses for future tendencies (Jamieson, 2011). According to this study, the crisis particularly hit medium-sized offices which dealt with the design of small commissions for small private investors. On the contrary, the crisis was more forgiving for large consultancy firms, which were able to standardise and rationalise the entire design process, from economic programming to post-occupancy. On the other hand, the RIBA study showed an increase in the number of very small "metropolitan design boutiques", which capitalise on a highly innovative research-based design practice. In both cases, the work of the architect resembles

more that of an organiser of human and material resources than a traditional creator of architectural forms.

Another important tendency that has emerged is the so-called “activist architecture”. Nishat Awan, Tatiana Schneider and Jeremy Till (2011) explored the possibility of doing architecture with other means than buildings. Rejecting the definition of “alternative architectural practices,” they proposed the idea of “spatial agency.” In their proposal, the concept of space leaves the disciplinary and historical binds of architecture behind while that of “agency” evokes an active role of the architect in the organisation of social processes, thereby dispelling the idea of a professional practice driven by clients and economic necessities. According to Awan, Schneider, and Till “spatial agency” cannot be seen as an “alternative,” especially after the 2008 financial crash limited the architects’ possibilities to build, at least in the Western world. In this way, the work of the architect resembles more and more the work of a social researcher. As a mediator between various interests and figures, the architect can act as a social researcher, an ethnographer, a participant observer, thereby blurring the boundaries between the description of a given social and spatial reality and its transformation.

In the absence of a (built) product, architecture becomes increasingly performative, and the possibilities of a direct involvement with its spatial consequences are shrinking. For this reason, the tools for the dissemination of knowledge in the form of architecture books, magazines, online publications, and exhibitions are central for the activity of architects today. Despite the alleged crisis of the printed book, independent publishing experiments are mushrooming (Redstone, 2011). Curatorship is also emerging as a new autonomous discipline within architecture (Davidson, 2010); it is not seen as a mere reproductive activity—exhibiting and disseminating what already exists— but as a substitute for architectural criticism after its demise, as it has been suggested (Gadano, 2010).

Process management, activism, architectural journalism and curatorship might not be forms of architectural research in a strict sense, but they surely imply research activity in their foundations. The increasing importance of these practices in today’s architectural production is well documented. However, few have attempted to expose the power

relations that produced these transformations and, in turn, were produced by them, contextualising architectural research in the contemporary forms of cognitive labour (as an exception see Self & Bose, 2014). Such an attempt would need to locate the new languages, tools, ideas and methods of architectural research within the economic and institutional milieus in which they emerged, and sketch a portrait of the subjective characters that are involved in novel architectural production. By expanding Jeremy Till’s Foucauldian slogan, we could say that besides the *archaeology* of architectural production, we also need to look for its *genealogy* and expose the “microphysics of power” that are at the core of current architectural production.

Dutch architecture between its “golden age” in the early 2000s and the approval of drastic cuts to public funding of culture in 2012 offers a favourable testing ground for such an approach. The Dutch case is particularly instructive because of the central role architecture played in the construction of public consciousness, at least starting from the post-war period. Secondly, the transition from a welfare-based planning system to a neoliberal spatial organisation occurred not through deregulation and the disappearance of the state, but on the contrary through an active direction of governmental and local institutions (Bouw & Meuwissen, 1999). Finally, the Netherlands has been the avant-garde in the promotion and dissemination of alternative architectural practices. These transformations have not only affected architecture as a discourse. Alternative, bottom-up and research-based spatial practices are today central in Dutch urban planning, and they are active elements in the production of the Dutch urban landscape.

Rien ne va plus

Starting from 2008, the lack of commissions led many Dutch architects towards research activities, benefiting from a vast network of public and private cultural funding institutions. In this context, the Rotterdam-based architecture firm Powerhouse Company curated a research project and an exhibition titled *Rien ne va Plus: Architecture in Times of Crisis* (Powerhouse Company, 2009).

The exhibition assumed that the present crisis is not only of a much larger magnitude, but of an altogether different nature from past economic crises. The present crisis should no longer be seen as a cyclic

event of global capitalism to be followed by its future readjustment, but as a permanent condition which signals the failure of the contemporary neoliberal model. According to the curators Nanne de Ru, Charles Bessard and Rieke Vos, it is the liberalisation of the architect's profession, together with the increasing accessibility of credit, that transformed construction into a speculative market, separated from the actual social needs for housing and new buildings. This increased the distance between the architects and construction processes, and a polarisation within the profession of architecture itself: some firms specialised in the construction process, while others welcomed this opportunity to focus on producing theoretical, imaginative and conceptual work, thereby transforming themselves into star-system ideologues of the emerging neoliberal era. The curators did not hide their resentment towards the Dutch generation of architects born in the forties and early fifties—and in particular, against Rem Koolhaas—whose pragmatic cynicism destroyed all moral values, without attempting to put forward any alternative. “As the Boomer wave burst through the dams of religion, restraint, boredom, morals and conservation, the following generations are left with the difficult task of defining their place within the flotsam of moral debris. The ungrateful task of cleaning up after the party” (Bessard & de Ru, 2009). The architects from Powerhouse company were expressing a general necessity for a renewed engagement of architects with social issues.

Superdutch

Yet, the baby-boomer generation did not feel the same necessity. The narrative of the “golden age” of Dutch architecture matured at the end of the nineties through various events and exhibitions (Kuper, 1997; and Lootsma, 2000a b). Dutch architecture was presented as a non-dogmatic open practice in an individualistic, post-socialist, post-conflict society based on the consensus-building tradition of the Dutch *polder model*. The series of cabinets led by the Labour Party in the 1990s ensured a gentle transition towards the privatisation of spatial governance, a form of neoliberalism with a human face. Despite the great availability of opportunities for building spurred by public commissions, a substantial share of the architect's work was devoted to research. This new kind of research was different from the 70s and 80s “critical” practice, which was a project of militant negativity with no direct design purposes, but with

the strategic idea of exposing the contradictions of the dominant ideology and its construction of reality. On the contrary, the new architectural research, epitomised by MVRDV's concept of “datascape,” was based on the “discovery” of reality as such, accepting whatever was already existing, and turning it into operative design inputs (Declerck & Dries, 2005; and Lootsma, 2000b a).

This pragmatic approach was inaugurated by the work of Rem Koolhaas, starting from the early 1970s. Koolhaas did not fit into the tradition of the Dutch section of the Team X, whose most prominent figures were Aldo Van Eyck and Hermann Herzberger. Koolhaas manifested his contempt towards their approach, which understood architecture as a discipline charged with the mandate of solving social problems (Davidson, 2014). Koolhaas reacted to this attitude, declaring that “there are no problems” to be solved by architecture. Through his studies on Berlin and Manhattan, and his interest in the architecture of Ivan Leonidov and the architectonic experiment of Kazimir Malevitsch, Koolhaas developed an interest for the neglected genealogy of an anti-humanist modernism, which aimed at creating its own conditions of existence and its own life-forms, rather than merely reforming and managing existing social conditions (Mastrigli, 2013). Koolhaas declared his nostalgia for a modernism that never existed in the Netherlands: “what I distrust most about Dutch Modernism is that there is not a jot of futurism there with all its enthusiasm for dangerous phenomena like war, not a jot of constructivism with its enthusiasm for dangerous phenomena like *mise en scène*, not a jot of materialism in it as there is in America with all its dangerous things like capitalist exploitation” (Koolhaas, 1999).

The rejection of the Dutch “moral modernism” (Crimson Architectural Historians, Speaks, & Hadders, 1999) and the acceptance of the metropolitan condition in all its violence were probably seen as revolutionary stances in the 1970s and 80s. On the contrary, the same attitude in the 1990s was interpreted as the opportunity to “communicate the message of flexible, apolitical coherency to a generation bored with conflict and ideological struggle” (Speaks, 1999). A positive attitude towards reality and the attempt of directly intervening in its folds were favoured as an antidote against the deadlocks of critical theory. However, at the end of the nineties, Koolhaas's joyful cynicism and his “Nietzschean frivolity” were technically

reproduced in the press, academically endorsed and consecrated by state subsidy (Muider & Koehler, 2005). While Koolhaas tried to dissociate his name from the Superdutch legacy of his younger colleagues, and to deny his responsibility for the development of Dutch architecture of the time (Koolhaas, 2001; Lund & Aureli, 2002), the “Golden Age” of Dutch architecture was already about to end. The “enlightened liberalism” of purple cabinets was supplanted by new centre-right coalitions, which included members of the rising populist movements. The murders of populist leader Pim Fortuyn in 2002, and xenophobic film director Theo van Gogh in 2004 signalled the end of the Dutch dream of a frictionless society dominated by the rationality of market forces (Lootsma, 2008). The public support to radical and inventive architecture in the form of public commissions and subsidies was drastically cut, and a new wave of pragmatic, neo-traditionalist suburban vernacular architecture emerged (Grafe, Maaskant, & Stuhlmacher, 2005).

Unsolicited architecture

Forced by the stagnant European situation to find building commissions elsewhere, OMA started a process of “going East,” finding new opportunities in Emirates and China and attracting the contempt of the new moralisers of architecture, who blamed him for working for non-Western anti-democratic regimes. At the same time, Koolhaas started to perceive built architecture as too slow to keep up with the fast pace of contemporary transformations. To cope with this predicament, he established AMO as a research *doppelgänger* of OMA in 1999. AMO is devoted to architecture as a light, fast, practice beyond building. Through research, architecture can become an all-encompassing discipline, the “diagram of everything” (Koolhaas, 2004). In 2005, Volume magazine was founded as the collaboration of an architectural firm (AMO), a cultural production foundation (Archis) and an academic institute (Columbia University’s C-Lab). Volume magazine, edited by the influential curator and cultural activist Ole Bouman, is devoted to go “beyond” architecture at any cost, and to go even beyond itself (Bouman, 2005), to the point that every issue is a standalone book, sometimes thematically in open contradiction to the preceding issues. By splitting the activity in two specular parts, one devoted to the activity of building at any cost, and the other to an activist-like practice of cultural agitation, the office OMA/

AMO embodied the dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde condition of the architecture of the 2000s. The paranoid attitude that drove the office in the 1980s finally turned into schizophrenia in the 2000s.

In 2008, just before the burst of the mortgage bubble, Volume published its 14th issue titled *Unsolicited Architecture* (Oosterman, 2008b b), which mapped and gave a systematic definition to the emerging forms of architectural practice. According to the editors, unsolicited architecture is based on the transgression or swerving of one or more of the “cornerstones” of traditional architectural practice: the client, the program, the site, and the budget. These can be either rejected or reclaimed by internalising their causes. The issue provided a large amount of actual and hypothetical examples, including their budget and financing opportunities. For instance, architects can “misuse clients” in order to transform traditional commissions into opportunities for developing an autonomous agenda, or actively participate in the definition of a program. Crucially, in the crisis of traditional commissioning and facing the lack of public subsidy, architects are encouraged to become their own clients or financial investors, transforming themselves into entrepreneurs and developers.

In this way, the practice of unsolicited architecture is welcomed in order to transform architects “from extremely competent executors of assignments into entrepreneurs and producers” (Oosterman, 2008a). But at the same time, unsolicited architecture is seen also as the possibility to reclaim a new definition for the old debate over the autonomy of architecture: no longer a “passive facilitator or a court jester with special permission to do weird things every now and then,” (Bouman, 2008) the definition of what an architect can become is in this way only limited by the architect’s own capacity of imagination.

Apparatuses of capture

Facing the changing juridical structures of the post-2008 city, unsolicited architecture becomes a double-edged sword, a perverse mixture of radical self-empowerment and neoliberal governance, where the good intentions of individual agency are put at work through collective, automatic mechanisms of co-optation.

One of the offices operating through the practice of unsolicited architecture is the Rotterdam-based office ZUS. Led by landscape architects

cum philosophers Elma van Boxel and Christiaan Koreman, ZUS attempts to re-establish the central role of the architect in public space. As they describe their practice, architectural research and activism have a central role in their method, making them at the same time “co-authors and critics” of the design processes in which they are involved (van Boxel & Koreman, 2007).

The name of ZUS is linked to the location of their office, an old office building close to the Rotterdam station, in which they first established their premises through the *antikraak* (anti-squat) contract, which allows owners to temporarily let their premises without being subjected to the strict Dutch regulations for the protection of tenants (BAVO, 2008). Threatened by vague plans of demolition, ZUS became real-estate agents, and acted as the managers of a long development process, inviting various parties from the city to collaborate and offering various start-up creative firms to relocate their offices to the building, and transforming the ground floor into a restaurant and gallery space for exhibitions, conferences and public use. As van Boxel and Koreman point out, the success of such experiences is chronically precarious, permanently temporary (ZUS, 2009).

It is through these types of flexible practices that architectural research becomes not only an activity in which architects started to engage because of the lack of traditional commissions, but also the only way in which the city could be developed in times of credit crunch and lack of liquidity. In 2012, the Dutch government approved cuts of 200 million euros from cultural activities (Miessen, 2011), which led to the demise of several cultural funding schemes and international research institutions such as the Berlage Institute. Unsolicited architecture became then not only a choice for advanced architecture offices to gain independence and agency, but a necessity to continue to survive in an increasingly deregulated environment. At the same time, the widespread availability of these independent practices was welcomed by developers and they became an important part of the official municipal planning policies, under the theory of the *creative city* (Avidar, Havik, & Mulder, 2009).

The crisis signalled in this way a paradox. On the one hand, it opened the possibility for communities of inhabitants and workers to acquire autonomy over the organisation of their labour and living activities,

often through the experimentation with radical juridical structures such as the recuperation of the medieval concept of the *commons*. At the same time, it was evident that such structures were also very much compatible with neoliberal urban governance (Griffioen, 2011).

In an article contained in a special issue of the journal *Open* (whose publication also ended as a consequence of the budget cuts), Italian philosopher Matteo Pasquinelli took gentrification as a paradigmatic case of such a paradox. Gentrification is a mechanism of extraction of wealth that is produced by autonomous urban communities. Artists and creative workers are the “pioneers” of gentrification, producing a cultural capital which is not going to be redistributed among those who contributed to produce it, but which establishes the condition for a colonisation of wealthier inhabitants (Pasquinelli, 2009).

For Pasquinelli, gentrification is the diagram of how capitalist accumulation works in postfordism. Unlike the Fordist, industrial economy, in which wealth was produced directly by capitalists by organising labour and means of production, in postfordism it is the autonomous co-operation of individuals that produces wealth. This is separated from their producers only in a second moment, through various mechanisms of value extraction, of which gentrification is only one of them (Pasquinelli, 2010a a).

This kind of analysis was developed in the nineties by the authors commonly referred to as post-Operaists. Among others, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and Paolo Virno attempted a revision of Marxist categories *vis-à-vis* the rise of a service- and knowledge-based neoliberal economy (Lotringer & Marazzi, 2007). In the first years of the crisis, these theories filtered in the Dutch context through the mediation of the art world, which was probably more affected by the precarisation of working conditions, and the attempts of political co-optation (Gielen & Bruyne, 2010).

The Dutch and Belgian artist and activist collective BAVO (Gideon Booie and Matthies Pauwels) called upon artists to “be uncreative” as the ultimate form of resistance against the creative city and its mechanisms of value extraction and gentrification (BAVO, 2007). On the contrary, Pasquinelli refused such a self-imposed austerity, proposing forms of art

sabotage directed not against the activity of creative producers, but towards the reappropriation of the value of their production (Pasquinelli, 2010b b) However, the situation regarding today's creative city policies seems to go in an opposite direction. The traditional gentrification pattern was based on the tolerance of temporary "underground" activities, with little or no financial pressure over the "creatives" themselves, who could enjoy free or cheap studio spaces and living facilities. Today, unsolicited architects and creative enterprises are called to actively participate as developers and project financiers within similar processes, directly investing labour and capitals in temporary developments, with no guarantee of permanence: a paradoxical form of bottom-up gentrification.

The psychopathologies of architectural research

Unsolicited architecture can be read as the encounter between architectural research with the late capitalist urban condition and the uncertainty of its juridical structure. From the point of view of the postfordist political economy of architecture, architectural research is the language-based, affective labour of knowledge production in architecture. The centrality of language should not be seen as the 1970s and 1980s critique's emphasis on linguistics and language as the structural foundations of architecture as an autonomous discipline. On the contrary, beyond the collapse of the disciplinary foundations of architecture, language is today the collective means of production through which architecture can become fully socialised. In other words, language in architectural research is not only a form of communication, the capacity to transmit information, but also the affective infrastructure that is necessary in constructing professional networks and creating public consensus.

In its affective dimension, architectural research produces its specific subjective figures and its peculiar forms of life, which we can summarise in three conditions: *panic*, *debt* and *cynicism*. These conditions characterise every form of contemporary cognitive labour, but it is possible to isolate specific modes in which architects experience these affective states.

Franco Berardi, a political philosopher who dedicated much of his work to the analysis of the psychopathologies in contemporary labour, has defined panic as "the feeling we have when, faced

with the infinity of nature, we feel overwhelmed, unable to receive in our consciousness the infinite stimulus that the world produces in us" (Berardi, 2009). The contemporary working environment is based on the assumption that there are endless opportunities for career advancement, and that self-realisation is based exclusively on the individual's capacities. After the collapse of social classes, there are no longer exploiters and exploited: just winners and losers (Berardi, 2015). Panic arises in this context since, after the collapse of well-defined social norms and habits, the individual is faced with a complete responsibility for the construction of their own happiness within a chaotic and boundless sea of opportunities.

It should be clear now how panic affects the specific domain of contemporary architecture. If there are no longer disciplinary foundations for architecture, if architecture is no longer made by walls, doors, windows and roofs, if it has lost its own specific language of drawing and representation, how should one make sense of it? How should one construct meanings out of the enigmatic "diagram of everything"? This also implies crucial economic problems: how should one's architectural practice be evaluated (and paid) if there are no longer shared standards for measuring architect's work? In the past, architectural work was paid according to a specific percentage of the construction fee. How can an architect be paid if there is no construction? Should we consider the working time? But how should we distinguish work from non-work time when architectural work becomes indistinguishable from one's affective life?

This condition is given by the fact that one's success is completely dependent on the individual's linguistic and social capacities. The practice of "unsolicited architecture" poses unprecedented burdens over the architect's individual responsibility, which leads to the construction of the architect as an indebted subject (Lazzarato, 2012). This debt is, on the one hand, a financial and mathematically quantifiable debt: if the architect is asked to take care of the financial development of her own projects, then it is very likely that she is going to turn to banks and credit in order to have access to the liquidity that is required by her new duties. But on the other hand, there is also an unmeasurable, infinite, existential debt that is arising, since the architects' duties are not defined once for all as they used to be, and the possibilities for the expansion of their

responsibilities are virtually endless. Moreover, the architect's activity is highly loaded with social issues. Architecture is charged with the responsibility of providing the solution of every social problem today. For this reason, architects have heavy moral duties: "architecture has consequences," (Bouman & Abhelakh, 2010) and architects must pursue "The Good Cause," as the title of a recent exhibition by Archis Foundation goes.

Obviously, it is not really necessary to believe in this redemptive capacity of architecture. This leads to cynicism, which is not simply a "sad passion," but an indispensable survival capacity for contemporary workers (Virno, 2004). But today's cynicism is different from the cynicism of the Superdutch. While the previous generation experienced a joyful cynicism in terms of the possibility to operate within the gaps opened by the collapse of the morals of the previous generations, today's cynicism is the opposite. It is the necessity to construct an artificial morality to generate work opportunities, and to celebrate collaboration and collective work in the midst of an environment of fierce competition.

Despite the "dark sides" of architectural research practices today, it is beyond doubt that the present condition is full of opportunities: an unprecedented concentration of self-organised intellectuality, after having jettisoned the languages and practices of the past generations, is today being precluded a predictable future. A resistance towards the creative city and neoliberal governance does not mean repressing the potential of collective creativity, but opportunistically and cynically turning it for one's own good, as a collective therapy against architecture's psychopathologies. To prevent panic, we could acknowledge once again the limits of architectural research. This does not mean returning to a universal set of principles that is valid at any time in any place, but constructing, in the fashion of Félix Guattari's schizoanalytic aesthetic paradigm (Guattari, 1995), provisional systems of collective rules, habits and codes that are capable of carving meaning out of the chaos of endless possibilities. Secondly, a swerve from the universal social responsibility and moral debt that architects have willingly assumed over themselves could be therapeutic. Instead of solving all-encompassing social problems, architects should first perhaps employ their creative efforts on problematising their own social status as knowledge and creative workers, finding imaginative solutions towards the establishment of new forms of practice

and institutions based on the principles of cooperation and mutualism. No one could predict the consequences of a diffused solidarity and organisation between architects and artists. Today, they do not have anything to lose but their precarity.

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