

Architectural Autonomy: from Conception to Disillusion

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Abstract

The editorial introduction for this issue of Haecceity Papers describes three categories of contemporary architecture: the technological, the critical and the neo-liberal. All three relate, albeit in very different manners, to architectural autonomy. In the forty years since it moved to the center of architectural discussion, autonomy has become a powerful idea, without which any understanding of recent architecture is rendered partial and limited.

The first of the three categories, technological architecture, is a specific result of the computer revolution in architectural practice, a disciplinary revolution the scale of which architecture has not evidenced since the Renaissance. The central interest of technological architecture has been the study of the new tools available to the discipline, examining the opportunities of designing innovative form and producing exhilarating imagery. The major attribute of this category is *newness*, which is related to the novelty of both software and hardware. Technological architecture has been driven, primarily, by innovative software of representation rather than – as in modernism – by technologies of realization and construction. Representation software, unlike construction technologies, is the privilege and professional instrument of the architect. Thus, the work of the protagonists of this category – Greg Lynn, Nox, Kas Oosterhuis, Asymptote – is an extreme example of autonomous architecture: architecture concerned with the discipline itself, studying its new means of representation.

The relation of architecture to autonomy also stands at the center of the two other categories mentioned by the editorial: the critical and the neo-liberal, the latter of which will be called here “the real”. Both categories have a longer history than the technological: they rose from the ashes of modernism in the late 1960s, and have dominated architectural discourse ever since, particularly in the United States. Peter Eisenman and K. Michael Hays propagated the idea that autonomous architecture is *critical*, whereas the category of “the real” consists of a loosely aligned group of practitioners and critics interested in diverse strategies to engage the everyday reality, whether on a cultural, economic or political level, united in castigating the idea of architectural autonomy. Recently, the antagonism between these two categories has reached a climax with the ‘post-critical’ debateⁱ.

In the escalating dispute, ‘critical’ architecture has been commonly conflated with architectural autonomyⁱⁱ. This correlation, accepted as matter of fact by too many practitioners and theorists, is highly contentious and open to dispute. Understandings of autonomy in art have transformed significantly in the two centuries since it was conceived as a theoretical term; in architecture, autonomy has an even shorter and more ambiguous history. In light of the current debate, the following text will attempt to disentangle the skein of ideas of architectural autonomy and explain their development. To do so, the essay will chronologically progress from the writings of Emil Kaufmann to contemporary understandings of autonomy, concisely relating to a variety of diverse usages of the term in architecture. Autonomy and opposition to autonomy have been central to the discipline’s development in the last four decades; the changing status of autonomy itself is, therefore, bound to influence architecture in the near future.

ⁱ For a concise but potent overview of this debate, see George Baird, “‘Criticality’ and its Discontents”, *The Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall 2004/Winter 2005, number 21.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Bob Somol and Sarah Whiting, "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism", *Perspecta 33: The Yale Architectural Journal*, 2002, 73.