Hilde Heynen

Utopia, Critique and Contemporary Discourse

One of the aims of this conference is to discuss the status of architectural theory in its relation to practice. Let me start therefore by pointing out my opinion on this matter. In order to be as encompassing as possible, I work with a very broad definition of 'architectural theory': for me it comprises all kinds of discourses that in one way or another deal with the question 'what is architecture?' Which means that reflections by architects on the scope and value of their own work belong to it, alongside with more distanced discourses which seek to establish connections with other disciplines, such as philosophy, art theory, psychoanalysis or sociology. It is absolutely necessary for architectural theory to interact with architectural history, since the question 'what is architecture?' cannot be answered if historical conditions are not taken into account. The relation between architectural theory and architectural practice, on the other hand, seems to me to be indirect: architectural theory might have a relation to architectural practice that can be labelled as 'framing', 'questioning', 'criticizing', 'challenging' or 'positioning'. I do not believe, however, that architectural theory can in one way or another 'guide' or 'orient' practice. That would boil down to a version of operative criticism that Tafuri already was very critical of.[1]

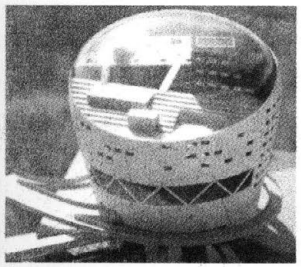
Critical and post-critical discourses

One of the major issues in recent theoretical discussions has to do with the issue of criticality. The assumption that architectural theory should build upon critical theory and be critical itself has recently been challenged, especially in the United States. Now I am one of those who continue to believe in the validity of the critical project. Let me start therefore with pointing out what I understand under the term 'critical theory', in order to develop from there a counter-critique against critical theory's critics.

According to Max Horkheimer, critical theory is that branch of humanities that is motivated by the tension between rationality and reality.[2] Critical theory does not wish to accept social reality as it is, but always questions its legitimation

and justification: is it absolutely necessary that social reality is as it is, or are there possibilities to imagine – and realize – a more humane, a more just, a more emancipated society? Critical theory as initially embodied by the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse) discussed all kinds of things with these questions as leading motivations. This critical tradition has been taken up by later developments, among them poststructuralism, feminism and postcolonial theories.[3] The most important critical contribution of poststructuralism has to do with its striving to criticize all forms of essentialism: according to poststructuralist thought, one should be wary of all parties who claim to possess truth because they know the 'essence' of a certain matter – be it beauty, or justice, or violence, or architecture. Deconstructive thinking, for example, has been critical of all notions inherited from tradition regarding the 'nature' of architecture. Feminist theories have used this approach to question gender as social and cultural construction, and to criticize the oppression that is effectuated in the name of the 'natural qualities' of either men or women. Postcolonial theories have criticized colonialist and imperialist discourses, showing us how they embody a series of unacceptable assumptions about the superiority of European culture, justified by claims about progress and moral values.

The processing of these theoretical contributions into architectural theory has led to the expectation that the most worthwhile architecture should be critical: architectural works should relate to their social condition in a critical manner. My book *Architecture and Modernity. A Critique* can be read as such: it builds up an argument, relying on the critical theories of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, that leads to the claim that architectural works, through their mimetic relation with program, site, materials, historical and social context, can critically reflect upon their social condition.[4] This critical reflection is possible because architecture has an autonomous moment – it is not entirely determined by heteronymous forces such as technical, functional or economic requirements. The recognition of an autonomous moment in architecture is indeed a necessary but by no means sufficient requirement for a critical architecture. In every built work of architecture social interests are also at stake. A critical treatment of social reality therefore inevitably operates at various levels simultaneously and cannot just be reduced to the packaging aspects of a building. Questions such as 'who is building and for whom?', 'what is its impact on the public domain?' or



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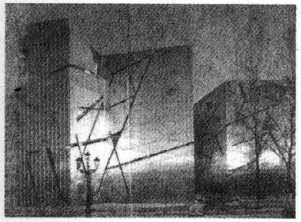

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who will profit from this development?' are and will continue to be relevant in this connection. These questions too can be mimetically incorporated in the design however, giving more weight to its critical aspirations.

In the book I developed these arguments through a critical discussion of two projects: the Seacenter for Zeebrugge by OMA / Rem Koolhaas and the Jewish Museum in Berlin by Daniel Libeskind. [Fig. 1, 2] I linked the idea of criticality with Lyotard's urge to 're-write modernity'. Thus I argued that the Jewish Museum in Berlin is an example of the way in which architecture, 'after Auschwitz', can rewrite the meaning of modernity. 'Auschwitz' stands for the ultimate uninhabitability of modernity. The impossibility of dwelling, the bankruptcy of modernity's promise of a *new Heimat* is given architectonic form in the cold and gloomy depths of Libeskind's voids. Out of the intertwining of the two lines and the play of space, light and texture, something else also appears: what is involved here is not only despair and mourning; it is also hope for the future which can only take shape through a lucid grasp of the hopelessness of the present. It is here that Libeskind's critical reworking of the legacy of the Enlightenment lies. Rewriting modernity means a face-to-face confrontation with its failures and perversities; inherent in it is an anamnesis of the past as the precondition for taking any step into the future.

Koolhaas is less urgently concerned with reworking the past. Even so the mimetic strategy of the Sea Terminal provides us with a work that in its 'inevitable transformation into a cultural commodity' witnesses to 'the impossibility of the work', as Lyotard would have it. This project refuses to choose between a banal commercial logic and the aspirations of art. Both are at issue here, both are equally valid. They are inseparably entwined, without being totally fused. It is precisely in the chasm between them that the 'margin' exists that forms the tension of the design. In the intertwining of complicity with the system and opposition to the levelling tendencies inherent in it, the project of rewriting modernity is given form.

The basic idea that architecture can and should be critical, however, has recently come under attack. Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, for example, state that the days of 'critical architecture' are over, and that the stage should be given to 'projective architecture'.[5] They understand critical architecture

as the kind of architecture advocated by people such Michael Hays and Peter Eisenman, who are in a way relying upon the intellectual legacy of Colin Rowe and Manfredo Tafuri. Their 'critical architecture' then is indexical, dialectical, based upon ideas of 'representation' and 'autonomy'. The 'projective architecture', on the other hand, would rather be 'diagrammatic', based upon 'atmospheric interaction', aimed at 'cool performance' and concerned about 'multiple engagements', recognizing a diversity of economies, ecologies and social groups. In their article Somol and Whiting do not mention specific names, but it is clear that their description fits the practices of young and coming architects, such as the Dutch office MVRDV (with their 'Datascape' techniques) or the New York based practice Architectonics (with their project for a 'Flex-City').

The tendency to declare architecture to be in a 'post-critical' stage is, however, far less visible in Europe. On the contrary, even. In April 2003, for instance, a colloquium was held in Brussels, organized by Nethca and entitled 'Critical Tools'. During this colloquium, almost all the speakers coming from France, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, agreed that the critical project had to be paramount in architecture (although they rather disagreed about the exact meaning and implications of this shared assumption). Only one of the keynote speakers, Alejandro Zaera-Polo, started his lecture by referring to the American discussion and the supposed fact of a 'post-critical' condition for architecture.

Another counter-example can be found in a recent publication by NAI Publishers: *New Commitment*.[6] This publication is announced on their website like this:

> NAi Publishers has noted an increasing level of discussion in architecture and urban planning, in the visual arts, photography and design about social issues. Architects, artists and designers are on a quest for legitimacy for their work and for socially relevant activities. Professional journals are calling for reflection and reconsideration of how one carries out one's craft. In other words, a debate is clearly underway about a new form of engagement by the design and visual disciplines toward the current problems of society.

NAI thus clearly observes a renewed interest in architecture's critical potential.

One should question anyhow the relative merit of this new enthusiasm. There is of course a tendency to search for ever new themes and perspectives because they are needed to keep the production of architectural publications going. It is not so strange that as a result of that tendency a theme reappears that seems to have been out of sight for long enough for it to be presented as something fresh and new today. Adorno has been warning for this, stating that

> The new, sought for its own sake, a kind of laboratory product, petrified into a conceptual scheme, becomes in its sudden apparition a compulsive return of the old, ...[7]

At the same time, however, he also recognized the critical potential of the new:

> The cult of the new, and thus the idea of modernity, is a rebellion against the fact that there is no longer anything new[8] and the new is the secret figure of all those unborn.[9]

Keeping this in mind, I think we should have another look at the discourse pleading for a 'post-critical' stage where we need a 'projective' architecture. In looking closely at the arguments developed by Somol and Whiting, for example, we see that they do not give up on the social dimension of architecture, that they do indeed stress architecture's relation to its social context as very important. Their strategy can be summed up in fact as a mis-representation of the whole idea of 'critical architecture', by focusing on some of its marginal aspects and ignoring others, followed by an advocacy for a new kind of architecture – 'projective architecture' - that in many ways is simply a new disguise for the old idea of 'critical architecture'. One also recognizes a typical motive in the whole strategy in that this is the outburst of a younger generation of critics who need to murder their fathers (Hays and Eisenman) in order to establish a legitimate position for themselves.

Given all this, what we need now, I think, is a re-assessment of modernism. Postmodernism and later "–isms" have never succeeded in attaining a similar validity in social and critical terms as modernism did. That is why, in thinking about criticality, we should return to modernism and then ask ourselves where we stand today.

A re-assessment of modernism

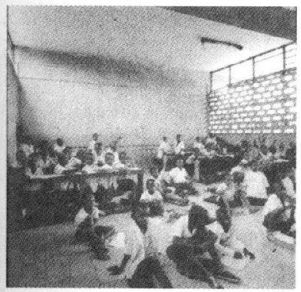
Two years ago I edited, with Hubert-Jan Henket, the volume

Back from Utopia. The Challenge of the Modern Movement.[10] It was our intention to draw up a certain balance of the Modern Movement and to assess what is its legacy for today. One of the major issues that came out of that effort was the question of colonialism. Indeed, looking back from a perspective of 80 years hence, there is no denying that there exists a direct link between the universalist and progressive ideals of the Modern Movement on the hand and the colonial discourse which legitimated colonialism as a political practice on the other.

When modernity is understood programmatically, as a project of progress and emancipation, it finds an outspoken manifestation in colonialism. The setting up of a colony often links the occupation of new territory with the desire to leave behind old habits and limitations in order to establish another, a new, a better order. The colony was seen as the locus of a new world, where the old world would be rejuvenated through its confrontation with purity and virginity. However, this idea of a new and better order was inevitably interwoven with a striving for conquest and domination. For the new land was seldom pure or unclaimed, and the establishment of a colony thus meant violation and oppression of another culture. This internal contradiction is by no means an unhappy coincidence brought about by historical circumstances. It is rather inherent to colonialism.

In postcolonial theories the interconnections between the Enlightenment project of modernity and the imperialist practice of colonialism have been carefully disentangled. Following the lead of Edward Said's *Orientalism*[11], it is argued that colonial discourse was intrinsic to European self-understanding: it is through their conquest and their knowledge of foreign peoples and territories (two experiences which usually were intimately linked), that Europeans could position themselves as modern, as civilized, as superior, as developed and progressive vis-à-vis local populations that were none of that.[12] Orientalism, according to Said, refers to that body of knowledge and practices that study and describe the Orient as the 'other' of the Occident, roughly equating it with the mysterious, the exotic, the excessive, the irrational, the alien. The other, the non-European, was thus represented as the negation of everything that Europe imagined or desired itself to be. This crucial role of the colonized in the self-understanding of Western culture is something that most accounts of modernity and modernism did not acknowledge. It is conveniently ignored in the conventional historiography of the Modern Movement. Only recently, in the work of historians such as Gwendolyn Wright or Zeynep Celik have these topics come to the fore.[13]

Indeed there are doubtlessly orientalist traits that can be recognized as for example in the discourse of Le Corbusier. His *Voyage d'Orient*, in which he acquainted himself with the vernacular architectures of Eastern Europe and Turkey, is a case in point. Although his experience of the spatial and constructional qualities of these architectures clearly contributed to the development of his own architectural vocabulary, they are not acknowledged as such, since they do not reappear in his modernist polemic of the 1920s which rather referred to ocean liners, grain elevators or airplanes as basic sources.[14] Another case in point is Le Corbusier's fascination with the city of Algiers and with Algerian women, which, according to Zeynep Celik, places him in the long line of French colonialist endeavours to conquer the feminine heart of the foreign culture.[15] In such instances, the complicity of modern architecture's discourse with the colonial enterprise to establish Western hegemony over the world seems to be revealed.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There is however more to it. Whereas it cannot be denied that modern architecture was often instrumental in the formation of colonialist domination (reference can be made to the French architecture in Algeria and Morocco, or to the Belgian one in Congo, or to the Dutch one in Indonesia), the identification of modern architecture with the colonizers was not a given that was established once and for all. The reception of the modernist architecture in Kinshasha was fundamentally ambivalent. As clearly recognizable points of intervention by the colonizers, modernist buildings were the prime targets of attack for the rebellions that sought to overthrow the colonial rule. After independence was established, however, this architecture has been willy-nilly appropriated as basic infrastructure that cannot be missed in order for the city to function. [Fig. 3] As such it remains a reminiscence of a dream that is not given up entirely: the dream of emancipation and liberation for all.

Another major issue in re-assessing modernism has to do with the sexism that was built-in as well. 'Modernism', in its broadest sense, can be understood as the generic term for those theoretical and artistic ideas about modernity that embrace the experience of the new and that aim to foster the evolution towards a brighter future. Typically, however,

these movements were part of high culture, and tended to be critical of mass culture and the homogenizing effects of modernization. Modernist discourses have thus often hailed the struggle for authenticity and integrity, and have denigrated the needs for comfort and consolation that were seen as characteristic for a petit-bourgeois mentality. This polarization of values, that underscored the distinction between art and kitsch, bears gendered overtones, as is pointed out by Andreas Huyssen:

> It is indeed striking to observe how the political, psychological and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities.[16]

In many ways the discourses and practices of modernism favoured masculine qualities, and were embodied by male representatives. This is for instance confirmed by Richard McCormick who comments that in the New Objectivity

> "the gender of the subject who seemingly produced it, the subject it glorified and to whom it was addressed, was obviously, explicitly, indeed defensively masculine."[17]

Not surprisingly then, the great modernist artists, authors and architects are predominantly male, and the canons in the different fields comprise only a limited number of women – even if the last decades saw important contributions by feminist scholars who attempted to re-inscribe women artists, authors and architects into the histories of the visual arts, literature and architecture.[18] Of course the dominating role of men in these fields was precipitated by the social and cultural conditions of the times, which encouraged men to follow their dreams and warned women not to stray too far from accepted patterns of life. We should not underestimate, however, to which extent the legitimating discourses of modernism reinforced the assumed superiority of masculine qualities over feminine features, and, consequently, facilitated the access of men into the roles of heroes and leaders, to the detriment of their female counterparts.

In the architectural discourse, for example, it was quite common around the turn of the century to see 19th century eclecticism being condemned for its 'effeminate' traits. Architects such as Hermann Muthesius, Adolf Loos or Henry van de Velde advocated the virtues of simplicity, authenticity and integrity, contrasting these sober and 'virile' qualities with the sentimentality, ornamentation and ostentatious pretensions associated with eclecticism.[19] Hendrik Petrus Berlage called for a modern architecture which would embody the sublime – a form of beauty, he explains, which differs from the more common quality of pleasing the eye, just like male beauty differs from female beauty.[20] The sublime is based upon spiritual strivings, asceticism and a totally free consciousness. These higher ideals, he states, should lead architecture to a new style based upon constructive principles, necessity and sobriety. A rather late variant of this gendered outlook on modern architecture can be found in Ayn Rand's 1947 *Fountainhead*, which depicts the male architect-hero as uniquely possessing the qualities of integrity, virility and authenticity which modern architecture requires.[21]

If colonialism and sexism were inherent to modernism – the most outspoken critical project of architecture of the 20th century – we should wonder about their impact on today's architectural culture. Can we state that we did overcome these issues? Is present-day architectural culture blameless in these respects? I do not think so.

It is easy to find evidence for this. Take for instance Rem Koolhaas' writings on Lagos.[22] He advocates Lagos as emblematic for the future of the city, as a kind of self-organizing entity that proves that the rigid logic of architects and planners can be overcome by the reality of urban life itself, which succeeds in reaching a very high level of performance, regardless of the rules and expectations of conventional planning schemes. Now, interesting and intriguing as his observations may be, they nevertheless remain observations by an outsider, a rich, white fellow who lands – out of the blue – in Lagos, spends there a couple of weeks venturing through the city in well protected cars and with minimal contact with the ground (and with the people), and declares all well and fascinating. [Fig. 4] With Yorgos Simeoforidis, we should be willing to wonder about the ethical questions this attitude evokes:

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> What can we say to the people of Lagos who do not inhabit, who do not commute, and who do not possess our Western comforts? That their Megalopolis is beautiful because everything is drifting? That they have no problems because Lagos is a city that works? That this is how all the world's big cities will be in the near future? That there is no need to do anything?[23]

As to the question of sexism, the continuing discrimination against women in the profession is well-documented. Although women make up a very large part of the student population, they nevertheless remain an underpaid and underrepresented minority in the profession itself. [Fig. 5] Women architects do not often rise to stardom, they usually remain in the background of the office, helping out and performing a large part of the less visible jobs. When the Berlage Institute recently asked a large number of notorious architects and critics to have their say about the contemporary situation of architecture, its questions were answered by 95 men and 17 women – a fair depiction, one might assume, of the present gender relations in the architectural field.[24]

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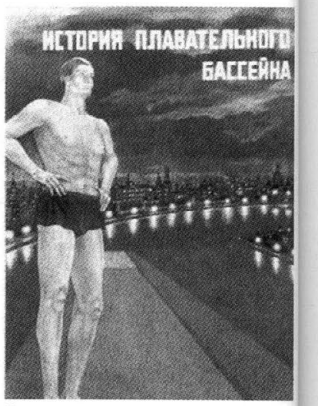
Now raising the critical issues of colonialism and sexism for me point forward to the underlying issue of utopia. Indeed, criticizing modernism and later tendencies for their failure to counter colonialism and sexism, can only be done when one assumes that another condition is possible – when one believes, that is, that a kind of utopian desire to realize a social reality without colonial or gender discrimination is not intrinsically false or ultimately unattainable.

The question of utopia

In order to start assessing the complicated relationship between utopia and critique in the field of architecture, I would like to start with a reference to Rem Koolhaas's 'Story of the Pool'.[25] [Fig. 6] According to this parable the floating swimming pool was designed by a Moscow architectural student one day in 1923. Struck by the strength of the idea, his fellow students decided to build it. Shortly after its construction, they discovered that by swimming in unison, in regular synchronized laps from one end of the pool to the other, the pool would start to move very slowly in the opposite direction. When communism turned into Stalinism, the pool's architects planned to make use of this mechanism in order to force their way to freedom. By swimming in the general direction of the country they left, they slowly guided their raft across the Atlantic. Their logical destiny was New York, which they reached after four decades. Their arrival was disappointing, to say the least, even if the New York architects decided to grant their colleagues a collective medal. The Russian architects therefore decided to continue their journey, only to collapse in front of the Welfare Palace Hotel.



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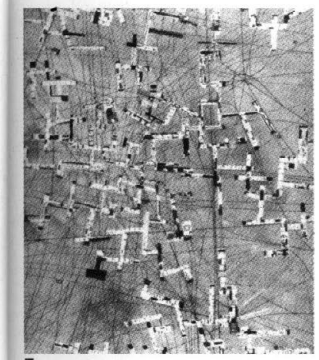
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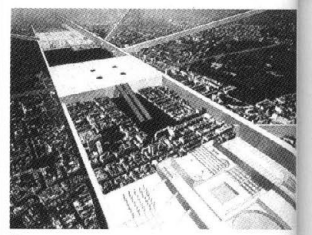
In its biting irony this story recounts the history of constructivism (and modern architecture) as Koolhaas saw it at the time (1976): emerging as an incredibly energetic, dynamic formal language that was completely bound up with the socialist revolution and its dreams of equality and emancipation, it lost its energy but not its dreams (nor its single-mindedness) in the years between the thirties and the seventies. Re-emerging in a capitalist society which had no use for the dreams and had sold out the forms as pacifiers of the welfare state, modern architecture could only face its collapse in confrontation with its sophisticated, but decadent successors.

Koolhaas's story has to be seen as embedded in a period of critical coming to terms with the fate of modernism. It belongs to a decade (the seventies) that took its leave of the previous one (the sixties) in which utopias of all kind had flowered abundantly. The sixties indeed saw a multitude of visionary experiments in architecture that were praised as offering critical alternatives to the present. A very typical and well-elaborated example was Constant's New Babylon project. [Fig. 7] This comprised a utopian scheme for a new mode of dwelling and a new society that took the form of a vast series of models, charts, sketches and paintings. New Babylon offered a consistent critique of social modernity - it was not without reason that Constant called his project an 'antithesis of the society of lies'. New Babylon is a simulation of a situation of total liberation - of an abolition of all norms, conventions, traditions and habits. In New Babylon imagination is in power and *homo ludens* is sovereign. At the same time the project testifies to the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in visions of this kind. In New Babylon therefore the antinomic character of utopia comes to the surface.

New Babylon is a visual version of the dream of ultimate transparency that Walter Benjamin detected in the avant-garde of the 20s. It presents an image of a social form in which the desires of the individual and the requirements of the community are inseparably entwined. As Constant describes it, it is a society where there is no longer any necessity for secrecy and possessions; it is an absolute collectivity in which the general interest coincides automatically with the sum of individual interests. New Babylon, it would seem, is a society without power relations. A utopia like this, however, is full of internal contradictions, which surface involuntarily in Constant's drawings and paintings. It is indeed impossible to imagine a society existing that is so harmonious

and free of stress without its individual members being subtly coerced to adapt and conform - an oppression that implies the opposite of genuine freedom. Dynamism, permanent change and flexibility are in fact ineluctably in conflict with qualities such as peace, repose and harmony. The latter is precisely what Constant's imagery suggests. The drawings and paintings indeed seem to convey a much more in depth understanding of the human condition than the texts. The images are hardly open to being interpreted as foreshadowing an ideal future; rather they appear as a multilayered commentary on the impossibility of giving utopia a concrete form.

A similar ambivalency – and even a swich to dystopia – can be observed in the first OMA-project: Exodus or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture. [Fig. 8] What the project attempted, according to Koolhaas in an interview in 1988, was a critique of the "innocence" and the unfettered optimism characterizing the visionary architecture of 1960s. OMA, with its project, wanted-



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to emphasize that the power of architecture is more ambiguous and dangerous. (...) Exodus proposed to erase a section of central London to establish there a zone of highly metropolitan life – inspired by Baudelaire – and to protect this zone with walls from the old city, creating maximum diversity and contrast. The people of London could choose: those who wanted to be admitted to this zone of hyper-intensity became 'The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture'.[26]

According to the Prologue of *Exodus*, the project aims to realize the impact of the Berlin wall by reversal:

It is possible to imagine a mirror image of this terrifying architecture, a force as intense as devastating but used instead in the service of positive intentions.

The inhabitants of this architecture, "those strong enough to love it," would experience a paradoxical liberation: "An ecstatic freedom in their architectural confines." At the same time, however, both Koolhaas and Zenghelis insisted on the brutal and highly ambiguous fact that all architecture necessarily functions by way of separation and exclusion, which is what the Exodus collages express in a – frivolously and, at the same time, poignantly – trenchant manner.
Rem Koolhaas is fully aware of this ambivalency, as is evident from the interview I recently conducted with him:

HH: What would you call Exodus then – a manifesto?
RK: Yes, it was a sort manifesto, too, more than that, however, it was a kind of short-circuit of good and bad intentions, of end and means... that the negative really is part of it, of the means.
HH: The negative meaning what?
RK: Exclusion, keeping at a distance, compressing, ...

Nevertheless this dystopian project also relies upon some kind of utopian desire, since "It requires a fundamental belief in cities as the incubators of social desires, the synthetic materializations of all dreams." The epilogue makes it clear that *Exodus* is a radical defense of the metropolitan idea and lifestyle:

If people were allowed to become acquainted with Architecture, they would decide to re-appropriate the physical and ideological decay of our Urban Societies and to rehabilitate their premises with the metropolitan idea and lifestyle.[27]

For me it is indeed crucial that the role of utopian thinking be recognized in architecture. As I argued in *Back from Utopia*, we should be aware of this as the most important aspect of the legacy of the Modern Movement: its capacity to criticize the status quo and its courage to imagine a better world, and to start building it. Modern architects were admittedly often naïve and over-simplistic in their architectural determinism. In as far, however, that their utopian impulse was based upon a critical attitude and upon a genuine intention to change the world, we should not denounce this dimension but rather seek to re-evaluate it.

And that is indeed what, I am glad to say, I see happening in some recent events. An exhibition on the work of Zaha Hadid and Patrick Schumacher, for example, was entitled *Latent Utopias*, its publicity stating that "Every epoch needs its utopias. A society that does not speculate about its future development is curiously disquieting, even monstrous." Also the way in which Okwui Enwezor organized *Documenta 11* betrayed a certain utopian desire. His concept was based on the idea of a critical methodology of interdisciplinarity that is appropriate to a global public sphere in which critical models and ideas of artists and intellectuals can be presented and discussed. One of the publications resulting from this effort was *Under Siege*. Four African cities, which explored how

African cities are becoming the exemplars for the emergence of new urban formations that are of great interest to many researchers working in the social sciences. It is in the polymorphous and apparently chaotic logic of the postcolonial city that we may find the signs and new codes of expression of new urban identities in formation. Under Siege: Four African Cities underlines a central paradox that seems to rule the view of African cities, namely their inherent dynamism and obsolescence, and engages different kinds of understanding of subjectivity and the cultural, political, social sphere of present day African urban conditions.[28]

Again, we should refer to the late Yorgos Simeoforides' critical comments upon such an undertaking. He asked absolutely pertinent questions:

What about the homeless castaways of globalization? The refugees of dismantled socialism? Cumbersome infrastructure? The reuse of abandoned industrialization? Our degraded and forsaken peripheries? Public spaces, swallowed up by privatized video monitors?[29]

These questions are absolutely crucial and topical. But they should not be seen as just inimical to a project such as Enwezor's – or Koolhaas' for that matter. Because Simeoforides' ultimate concern has to do with the transformative power of such projects:

My concern lies in the very idea of the venture as a transformation project (this is how I have come to see and interpret it over the years, irrespective of the size of the project). What do you think?[30]

It is in this sense that I also see the whole discussion regarding 'projective architecture': rather then label it 'post-critical' I would stress its transformative potentials. If you read 'projective' as 'embodying a project', it indeed contains a critical and even a utopian dimension. Utopia today cannot be about a singular, well-defined and straightforward concept for a future society. Utopia inevitably rests upon paradoxes and contradictions, and we have to work through them in order to transform the present into a future that might be somewhat better.

This attempt coincides with what the editors of a recent book – Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach – have termed 'embodied utopias'.[31] For them this term refers to the act of imagining an alternative to the constrictive and discriminatory spaces of the present, and then enacting this vision in all its materiality. It refers to social transformation in the making – the effort to work through the possibilities of fragmentary change and incomplete, unfinished projects that harbour the desire for a better world.

Indeed: if we no longer share the optimism of the early modernists who thought that *new* would automatically mean better, we still want to believe that, back from that naive utopia, we nevertheless have to continue the struggle that initiated the desire for it.

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