Half a Century of Liberation: From Objectivity to Amnesty

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New Objectivity: Acceptance and resignation

In 1923, in the first release of the German magazine G (Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung), El Lissitzky tried to explain his own idea concerning spatial construction: "the equilibrium which I seek to attain in the room must be elementary and capable of change so that it cannot be disturbed by a telephone or a piece of standard furniture. The room is there for the human being - not the human being for the room".[1] With this statement of intents LIssitzky, editor of the magazine along with Hans Richter and Werner Graeff, he made clear his position, in line with the contemporary spirit of what we now know as *New Objectivity*. This increasingly widespread approach in Germany suggested, in the name of empiricism, that the architect as an author should distance himself from his work, accepting his loss of control over what was in contact with it, and even over his own work. As Adolf Loos had ironically suggested in his tale of *the poor rich man*[2] and his sneakers - disharmonious with the style of the house designed by the architect - Lissitzky proposed abstraction as a mechanism to make architecture compatible with standard objects. In contrast to F. Ll. Wright´s Larkin building, Lissitzky did not feel the need to redesign the telephones, as Frampton pointed out[3], or to take charge of furniture design for the building, since it accepted the objects constructed empirically, that is to say, following strict engineering criteria (*sachclich*). Recognizing beauty and meaning aside from his work. The architect thus begins progressively giving up his authority, liberating himself from responsibilities and competences throughout the 20th century, to the point of posing, in the name of "inclusion", "neutrality" and "tolerance," the complete suppression of judgment.

The origin of the term is not entirely clear. The German historian Gustav Friederich Hartlaub, director of the Kunsthalle in Mannheim, claimed it as his own when in 1929 he wrote to Alfred H. Barr, then director of the MOMA in New York. Hartlaub tried to explain Barr how this expression had arisen a year before the 1925 Mannheim exhibition under the same title. Then, the heterogeneous work of various German painters was presented as an opposition to expressionism. Kenneth Frampton, however, points out that the term *Sachlichkeit* was expressly used in

cultural circles in Germany long before 1924; Herman Muthesius had used it in the late 19th century when referring to the English Arts & Crafts movement, more specifically the Garden Suburbs, and Even Heinrich Wölfflin already used the complete term *New Objectivity* in his 1915 book, *The Principles of Art History*, in this case explaining the linear vision introduced in painting at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In all cases a crude vision of reality was offered opposing idealization, sentimentality and expressionism[4].

Hartlaub especially linked the *New Objectivity* to ideological and identity issues, relating it directly to a "new realism bearing a socialist flavor" as opposed to the bourgeois realism of the nineteenth century. Hartlaub insisted on linking the idea of the objective to a generalized feeling of "resignation" and "cynicism" during the twenties in Germany. This "healthy disillusionment" which, in his opinion, found its maximum expression in Germany in the field of architecture, was characterized by the confrontation between the negative side of complaisance and another positive: "enthusiasm for the immediate reality as a result of a desire to take things entirely objectively on a material basis without immediately investing them with ideal implications". The conflict that arose here revolved around one of the most recurring debates in art theory and design throughout the twentieth century, which faces determinism and free choice. In other words, the one that is in charge to specify the level of authority and therefore of responsibility of the author, in this case architects and town planners on works and on the city.

Just half a century after Lissitzky's initial resignation, Laurids Ortner presented in 1978 his *Amnesty for Constructed Reality*[5]. Here the principles of objectivity and acceptance get radical, to the point of denouncing that any human intervention in a given environment is subjective, which leads directly to inaction. By accepting and promoting the whole constructed environment - everything erected by Man must be respected as it was - Ortner declared the abandonment of the humanist anthropocentrism which defined the last five centuries past. "The environment is not adapted to the man, it is the man who must adapt to the environment". This statement is paradoxical when referring to the environment built by Man himself, the urban landscape, as well as an explicit renounce to the critical spirit that had characterized humanism; the one that Lissitzky had demonstrated precisely in explaining how a space should be thought out. The loss of authority by the architect thus extends to the whole humanity, which relinquishes control of what it constructs and entails the total dissolution of any responsibility. The amnesty for everything built and assuming the disappearance of the architect, and Man in general, in the construction of the city, Ortner concludes: "the city is not built (by man) but it is self-constructed." This statement, seemingly Joycean, beyond the estrangement of the author and his work, raises the total inaction of a passive and uncritical attitude that accepts as valid the *laissez faire*.

.*Man Made America*: freedom and self-service

One of the main debates in England since the beginning of the second half of the 20th century was precisely the degree of acceptance, celebration or rejection by architects, urban planners and critics of the existing urban landscape. Focusing on the American suburbs and its influence in Europe, two progressively confronted opposites were established. AR (*Architectural Review*) with Gordon Cullen and Nicholaus Pevsner in charge and AD (*Architectural Design*) led by Theo Crosby closely linked to the activity of the *Independent Group* represented the two sides, supported by highly defined ideological positions. The conflict between English tradition and academicism on the one hand, and the unconditional celebration of American popular culture on the other, dealt with both aesthetic and political issues, focusing on a very specific matter: the level of control and responsibility that the architect should have over the urban environment. The dispute emerged coinciding with the economic debate carried out by Keynes and Hayek about the planning -regulation- or liberalization of the economy. The inherited terminology (planning, control, regulation, interventionism, freedom, spontaneous order, chaos, self-regulation, organic growth, laissez faire ...) shows to what extent the ideas managed within the "urban" debate arose in close relation with those used by economists.

The *AR* special published in 1950 under the title *Man-made America* constitutes an important research on American urban landscape and its disorder: its origins, the causes that had generated it and if, at that point, something could be done to correct it. *AR* urged Americans to assume their responsibility, and not to give up "visual ideals", intervening actively in the production of their own environment and not letting themselves be carried away by a liberal environment that resulted in an uncontrollable visual chaos: anarchy. After praising American popular culture, jazz, cinema, adolescent fashion... the *AR* editorial was committed to make clear the enormous difference between popular culture: "the world" and high culture: "the spirit", suggesting their concerns about that "spirit" in America. *AR* explicitly recommended Americans to accept their heritage and European tradition, and more specifically English, to build principles on which their landscape and environment construction could be supported, which is nothing but a reflection of society itself. *AR* saw the suburbs and commercial strips where merchandising and advertisements set up the whole urban scene, a "misery" in which "the generalized propagation of materialism had become uncontrollable".[6]

On the other hand, Lawrence Alloway defended from *AD* the American city as it was, "in its turbid vitality"[7]. When he was accused of "Americanism," he ironically replied: "I doubt that I have lost more by my taste for the American mass-media than have those older writers who look towards the Mediterranean as the `cradle of civilization'"*8*. The arguments for his statement defending consumer society and mass-media was basically the help they provided to society by increasing the possibility of choosing, anthropologically and politically, thus recovering popular power snatched by an elitist professionalism. But Alloway's interests, beyond socio-political issues, were fully related to aesthetic ones. In 1959 he set aside recurring social arguments when answering a critique of the luminous signs in Picadilly Circus. Facing the "Architectural Squalor" described by Ernö Goldfinger[9], he stated that "Picadilly Circus lights, though inferior to those in America, are the best possible view of London at night". Alloway was in summary an enormous critic against modern essentialism. For him, "to describe architecture as the creation of pure forms of an uncompromising technical perfection and aesthetic integrity leaves you alone on an island with Mies".

Alloway understood the city as an environment, but also, like Alison & Peter Smithson and Archigram did, as a mound of diverse activities, which changed much faster than buildings and even architect´s ideas. For him, the complexity and diversity of roles contained by the city discredited the architect as an organizing agent. Just as for Hayek, economists-planners would be unable to obtain and process all the necessary information to carry out the valid calculations for a planned economy, urban planning as an organizing task was rendered incapacitated.

If AR proposals called for reclaiming an authority that architects, landscapists and urban-planners were progressively giving up, *AD* hopefully welcomed this lack of control taking the spontaneity of American urban growth as the best example of freedom. These ideas, which in clear reference to Hayek theories directly related architects and planners with dictatorial power, would lead to a generalized skepticism towards planning. The celebration of *laissez faire* and the "apparent" urban chaos came from positions such as those of Reyner Banham and Cedric Price in *Non-Plan, an experiment in terms of freedom*[10], dating 1969. This theoretical work was published in New Society, a magazine that, although close to left tendencies, was always concerned with determining how things were, more than suggesting how they should be. The image on the cover of that issue, a neon sign reading "Self Service", could hardly be more explicit.

Design: A dirty word

In 1957 Alison and Peter Smithson found in the United States an aesthetic opportunity opposed to traditional and modern city models in Europe. In his *Letter to America*[11], published in *AD*, Peter Smithson recorded his deep disappointment when seeing that the American city was not so different in its organization and in its very conception from the European one. It was, according to him, a missed opportunity to look towards a promising future, rather than settling in the past. The greatest reproach of the Smithson's

to Americans was precisely in the opposite direction to those of *AR* in his 1950 *Man-made America*. If they had recommended Americans to be aware of their European heritage and to be actively involved in their townscape construction, Alison and Peter Smithson suggested the exact opposite: getting rid of this inheritance, accepting their responsibility and thus, taking advantage of the opportunity they had to develop an open and genuinely American aesthetic and organizational system.

Most American architecture belonged to the realm of "folk art" according to the Smithsons. But they suggested two very different ways of doing this: Taking as a model images of the old European style, without understanding them and therefore not changing them, as it happened in most cases; or letting a new imagery arise spontaneously and naturally, thus becoming "art". Diners, trailers, advertisements and every system of disposable items were included in this second category. The fact that the United States was a young nation in a virgin territory with an unprejudiced society, a highly industrialized economy and a mobility system based on the automobile, allowed the Smithsons to see America as their best opportunity to put into practice many of their urban ideas. The suburbs, in continuous expansion and change, where architecture and planning traditionally understood were no longer useful for its definition and development, became one of their greater interests. The overlapping of two systems, one as a permanent basis and the other a complementary one of disposable elements, was the basis of projects like the Haupstdat plan in Berlin, 1958 or the Golden Lane in London, 1952. The permanent system would be the territory, agricultural land, forests ... on which the network of motorways would be integrated, which would also be part of this revisable system every 25-50 years. Meanwhile, the disposable system would be created not by architecture as we understand it, but by things produced by industry (houses, shops, day care ...) in the same way as cars and appliances.

According to Denise Scott Brown, Alison and Peter Smithson reinstated the principles of German *New Objectivity* in England in the middle of the 20th century and reinterpreted them in theories such as *Active Socioplastics* and *But Today We Collect Ads*. As modern architects had done before when directing their attention to engineering and industry, the Smithsons found advertising and other aspects of popular culture as aspects the architect had to consider in an "unprejudiced" way. In *But Today We Collect Ads*, 1956, Le Corbusier´s House Citrohan and *Unite d´habitation* were presented to a great extent as a result of the use of popular resources and ordinary objects that were transformed, becoming part of the world of Fine Arts. When relating silos, planes, and advertisements,[12] they establish a parallel between the industrial and the commercial. Beyond aesthetic references, it involved socio-political issues which they paradoxically tried to liberate from when declaring themselves as part of "the Generation that left politics aside because it no longer fit their needs".[13] A resignation which reveals the instrumental conception of politics understood as a tool for the architect.

Alison and Peter Smithson, having accepted the revolution alien affecting architects carried out by mass production industries in housing design and construction - kitchens, bathrooms, and garages, seemed to escape their competencies -, suggested that it was time to admit that advertisements determined more than anything else the whole model of life: principles, morals, aspirations, objectives... That is why architects had to review this relationship with the world of advertising, as they had previously done with that of industry. The acceptance of the commercial and advertising as part of the architectural imaginary is part of the path drawn towards a supposed asepsis or aesthetic neutrality initiated at the beginning of the century, which now also became ideological. A new step is given in this direction when considering the term "design" as dirty. The Smithson's reaction against the idea of "design" puts them within the line drawn by the New Objectivity and its determinism, suggesting instead a much more aseptic expression: "positioning" with which the architect continues to distance himself of his own work. If "art" was a forbidden word for modern architects because of its implications of authorship, style, and personalizing...the Smithson's contempt for the word "design" could be understood as a reaction against what they denounced as "simple and literal fashionable attitudes". But the abandonment of the term "design", which makes simple allusion to the determination of a plan, to the configuration of a project, a drawing or model of something before it is constructed, already anticipated the recalcitrant realism that would soon arrive as a definitive reaction to the ideas introduced by modern architects. This only advanced the obsession of denying the simple possibility of projecting a possible future.

Robert Venturi´s partial amnesty

While Denise Scott Brown was studying at London Architectural Association, immersed in the confrontation between *AR* and *AD*, Robert Venturi toured Europe on various trips organized during his stay at the American Academy of Rome. In 1953, coinciding with *Parallel of Life and Art*, an exhibition that Scott Brown acknowledged as key in her education, Venturi published his first article precisely in the English magazine *AR*. The case study included in Townscapes coincided with Cullen's ideas when understanding "urban planning as a visual art".[14] The material collected by Venturi during his European tour served as basis for his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*[15], 1966, the work that, along with *The architecture of the city* by Rossi, has been understood as the landmark that evidenced the end of Modernity in Architecture.

One of the fundamental consequences of the critical action carried out in *Complexity and Contradiction*, as Mª Teresa Muñoz pointed out, was to consider architecture in its totality as "a formal system and as a reference of all constructed work, without necessity Of establishing explicit formal charges or limits"[16]. Venturi, following the principles of simultaneity and acrony claimed by Eliot for literature[17], performed a critique based exclusively on purely formal issues, regardless of historical and geographical criteria. Every piece of architecture built throughout history, from antique Egyptian temples to commercial contemporary streets in American suburbs, served together to elaborate a discourse that tried to get rid of the formal limits imposed until then, from traditional canons to modern ones. The recovery of concepts, such as tradition and history, meant, in the broadest sense of Eliot's literary criticism, to assume the referential component of the discipline in an indiscriminate manner, that is to say, taking into consideration at the same level all the work built until then. Venturi includes Times Square, Route 66, Levittown and Main Street... This Pop inclusion is already a generalized amnesty, which is evident in his analysis of Las Vegas, 1968 and in his Later Learning from "everything"[18], 1971. An inclusion which for Ortner would still not be enough and which, with very distant aims was already being handled in Europe, as Hans Hollein's provocative photographic manifesto demonstrated, *Alles ist architektur*[19], 1968.

If inclusion, as suggested by Venturi and Scott Brown, fostered certain vulgar architecture and "designing and building in a straightforward way, for community life as it is and not for some sentimentalized version of how it should be"[20]. Hollein resolutely distanced himself from this idea of inexpressive neutrality in order to focus on the objectual and sculptural condition of architecture, precisely aiming to recover its *expressive condition*. The two proposals, although based on different ideologies, suggested the practical denial of a specific disciplinary field. The argumentative effort by Venturi and Scott Brown when linking their ideas with the modern tradition led them to present commercial communication as another function of the building, replacing the modern concept of "truth" with that of a "sincere image", as it happens in their comparison between the *Guild House* and Paul Rudolph's *Crawford Major*. But fostering "democratic design" and "popular taste", far from linking with Hartlaub´s objectivism, involved delegating the architect´s attributions and responsibilities directly to "the people." This intended objectivity, based on the dissolution of the architect´s responsibility, is no longer focused on the object itself, but on the architect´s possibility of influencing and modifying people´s way of life. According to them, that is something the architect must resign to.

Consequences of the total amnesty

The sample collection analyzed in Las Vegas resulted in the theory of "ugly and ordinary", which in Ortner's opinion is a brilliant argument for a first amnesty, though still partial. He poses overcoming it in order to achieve a complete acceptance of this

"unpleasant reality", being able to face its new development from an unprejudiced attitude. When considering "everything" as architecture - from casinos and chapels in Las Vegas, to works by Oldenburg, Christo and Beuys[21]- Hollein is paradoxically dismantling the very discipline, implying that it no longer exists, that it is no longer necessary. The optimistic "All are architects, everything is architecture" by Hollein, will take very little to become in Ortner's hands: "no one should pretend to be an architect, nothing is architecture".

Ortner, far from redefining or extending the disciplinary field - models, principles and objectives - suggests its elimination, thus indicating the dispensable character of the architect as a critical agent. Ortner's proposal does not aspire, as the moderns did, to modify the established canons by looking for beauty in new places (machines, cars, silos ... even advertisements, as the Smithsons and Venturi would suggest); It does not even try to substitute some values for others (beauty for utility, industrial for commercial). Any judgment is understood as invalid, because it is raised from a "humanist" approach, and it is therefore subjective. For him, reality must be respected as it is, for the simple fact of existing, thus invalidating any critical aspiration.

In 1974, Fred Koetter wrote in Oppositions a review on Venturi´s writings. In his review Koetter already claimed the necessary balance that had to exist between a healthy acceptance of the reality and the hopeful commitment with a possible future.[22] Koetter pointed out, when referring to *Learning from Las Vegas*, the abandonment of the critical spirit that had characterized *Complexity and Contradiction*, by virtue of an uncritical celebration of what existed. If some moderns could have been naive when proposing an idealized and sentimental vision of the future, the progressive reaction against this modernity came to offer a version no less idealized and sentimental, one could even say nostalgic, of the present reality.

This genealogy, from Hartlaub's initial objectivity in 1924 to Ortner's total amnesty in 1978, attempts to point out the architect's progressive renunciation of his authority and consequently to his responsibility, to the point of suggesting his own disappearance. If at first the determinism of the object was advocated, in the course of barely half a century we come to propose the generalized self-determination of everything that exists. After the initial refusal by modern architects to consider the discipline as *Art*, came the resignation from Alison and Peter Smithson, who saw the word design as "dirty", suggesting instead a more aseptic term: "positioning". Then Venturi and Scott Brown's proposals no longer offered the possibility of projecting a future, focusing exclusively on the celebration of the present. Finally Ortner's total amnesty arrived, which simply denied all ability of *critique*, considering the mere existence a sufficient value and the fact that any human judgment is at the end, prejudiced.

The discourse constructed over this sequence of resignations -Art, Design, Project, Critic– which have been successively built on the implicit acceptance of the previous renounce, intends to alert on the risks of an autonomous theory, the consequent danger of falling in its literal interpretation and the inevitable neglect of practice and of the actual reality in which this theory is allegedly sustained. In this respect and going back to economics, we agree with Keynes when he acknowledges that he was "morally and philosophically in agreement with practically all of Hayek's ideas", while pointing simultaneously towards the more than likely failure of their practice.[23]

1. Lissitzky, El. "Proun Room: Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung, 1923", G nº 1, July 1923. p 4.

2. Loos, Adolf. "Von einem armen, reichen Mann", Neues Wiener Tablatt, Wien, April 26th, 1900.

3. Frampton, Kenneth. Modern Architecture, a Critical History, Thames & Hudson, London, 1980. p 130.

4. "The expression Neue Sachlichkeit was in fact coined by me in the year 1924. A year later came the Mannheim exhibition which bore the same name". Hartlaub, G. F. Letter to Alfred H. Barr, July 1929, in Frampton K. 1980. p 130.

5. Ortner, Laurids. "Amnestie für die gebaute Realität", Werk Archithese, n.65 vol. 17-18, 1978, p. 31-34.

6. Man-made America, Architectural Review nº 648, vol. 108, December 1950.

7. Alloway, Lawrence. "City Notes", Architectural Design, January 1959.

8. Alloway , Lawrence. "Personal Statement", Ark 19, Spring 1957.

9. Goldfinger, Ernö y Carter, E. J. The County of London Plan, Penguin Books, London, 1945.

10. Banham, Reyner. Price, Cedric. Barker, Paul. Hall, Peter. "Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom", New Society vol. 13, nº 338, March 1969.

11. Smithson, Peter. "Letter to America", Architectural Design n.28, March 1958. p 97.

12. "Gropius wrote a book on grain silos,Le Corbusier one on aeroplanes, and Charlotte Periand brought a newobject to the office every morning, But today we collect ads". Smithson, Alison and Peter. "But Today We Collect Ads", Ark n. 18, November 1956. p 49-50.

13. Smithson, Alison & Peter. "The As found and the Found", The Independent Group Postwar Britain or the aesthetics of Plenty, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Ma), 1990.

14. Venturi, Robert. "The Campidoglio: a case study", Architectural Review n. 113, May 1953. p. 333-334.

15. Venturi, Robert. Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture. Moma Press, New York, 1966.

16. Muñoz, Mª Teresa, La desintegración estilística de la arquitectura contemporánea. Ediciones asimétricas, Madrid, 2012. p.84. Phd disertation read in ETSAM, Madrid with the same tittle in 1982.

17. "...the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order". T. S Eliot. Selected Essays 1917-1932) Harcourt, Brace & Co, Nueva York, 1932. Quoted by Venturi in Complexity and Contradiction p.20.

18. Scott Brown, Denise; Venturi, Robert. Aprendiendo de todas las cosas. Tusquets, Barcelona, 1971.

19. Hollein, Hans. "Alles ist architektur", Bau 1/2, 1968.

20. Scott Brown, Denise. "Learning from Brutalism", en The Independent group. Postwar Britain and the aesthetics of Plenty, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Ma, 1990. p 203.

21. In the image compilation presented in Alles ist Architektur (Bau, ½, 1968) Hans Hollein introduced works by Christo, Claes Oldenburgandy Joseph Beuys as examples of Architecture.

22. "For architecture, in its most optimistic sense, not only acknowledges the world as it is, but at the same time, provides a hopeful and critic glimpse of the world as it might be" Koetter, Fred. "On Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's Learning from Las Vegas", Oppositions n. 3, May 1974. p. 103.

23. Keynes, John Maynard. Letter to Friedrich Hayek, June 28th, 1944. John Maynard Keynes, Activities 1940–1946. Shaping the Post-War World: Employment and Commodities, ed. Donald Moggridge, The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, vol. 27. Macmillan, London, 1980.

Objetivity
Ammesty
Permissiveness
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Ordinary