Review of K. Michael Hays, *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde* and Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*

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The similarities between these two volumes – both small, compact offerings by MIT Press – are striking because they set off how different are the intellectual worlds occupied by these authors, and in turn ask us to imagine what this difference means for contemporary theory. Both authors are enormously influential, powerful thinkers, and the opportunity to see them in simultaneous action is thoroughly provocative.

But to start at the similarities. Both Hays and Aureli take seriously and analyze the critical nature of architectural autonomy, "critical" in the sense that its overt retreat from a modernist, social engagement should be understood not as a cop-out, but as a self-conscious positioning in late-capitalism and the aftermath of modernism's failure in the face of late capitalism. The figure of Manfredo Tafuri (principal theoretician of modern architecture's demise) looms large in both texts, and they both can be seen as sequels to Tafuri's *Architecture and Utopia*. Both lodge their work in a neo-Marxist, politically engaged rhetoric. Both authors analyze four paradigmatic architects who represent the particular author's understanding of "critical" autonomy, and, although Aureli's examples begin with Palladio, both are intent on understanding what the 70's – seen by both as the watershed decade of autonomy enlightenment – tell us about architecture's potential potency in late capitalism. Both authors, following Tafuri, see that architecture's "autonomy", at least partially, is measured by architecture's dialectic position vis-à-vis its Other, the city. In sharing this attitude, the figures of Rossi and Koolhaas haunt both texts, since they, at the initial phase and in the contemporary enactment – take the city-architecture dichotomy as history/theory's polemic.

The differences, then, are less not the details, examples, or prescriptions within these similarities; rather, the two authors, while using the same words, speak different languages. Hays's thesis is that the late avant-garde architecture of the 70's, as exemplified by Rossi, Eisenman, Hejduk, and Tschumi, is the enactment of "architecture's desire," its death drive. The drive to absolute autonomy – which Tafuri had described/predicted as "the freezing of architectural discourse from all contact with the real" – is, Hays says, more dialectical than Tafuri imagined since these late avant-gardist KNOW this and inscribe it into their work. Using the Lacanian triad of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real - and essentially raising Tafuri's "real" to Lacan's "Real" - Hays traces the sequence from Rossi's "bleached-blank," part-object, typological Imaginary; to Eisenman's grid-obsessed, repetitious, textually-driven, self-differentiating engagement with the Symbolic; to Hejduk's subject-object angst of his walls-as-screens and his masks-as-lack that demonstrate the "intrusion of the of the Real into the Imaginary;" and finally to Tschumi's spatialization and recoding of architecture's emptiness which "recognized most that the architectural Real is both the impenetrable core that resists discursive appropriation" and enacts the intrusion of the Real into the Symbolic. (Phew!)

Aureli's thesis is that architecture's criticality can be measured by its resistance to capitalism's managerial approach to urbanization while also absorbing the lessons of citizenship and type that only the city provides. Using the term "archipelago" to describe the architectural artifact that resists the totalizing system - not through formal virtuosity but through the establishment of limits particular to architectural monuments - Aureli traces the archipelago thinkers from Palladio, whose palazzos and villas abstract urban historical types while also reinserting those types into the specificity of the local conditions; to Piranesi, whose maps of Rome reject the assumed neutral ground of Nolli's maps and replace it with the non-neutral, massive, stoney, monuments of antiquity; to Boullee's monuments which absorb the spatial lessons of Paris (courtyard, square and axis) into themselves; and then to Ungers, who actually hands Aureli the archipelago metaphor and demonstrates the need to capitalize on Berlin's fragmented, de-densified nature in establishing architectural types commensurate with each neighborhood's history.

At the most obvious level, Hays and Aureli define both architecture and autonomy differently.

 —is understood differently by each. Hays does not see architecture as the total of architectural projects; rather, it is a historical concept independent of these objects, one that he personifies, puts on the couch, and psychoanalyzes. The individual projects that he describes are understood as symptoms of architecture's death drive. Aureli is interested in buildings, as much for what they say about the citizens they are meant to house as for the objects themselves. "Autonomy" is understood by Hays to be a historical condition that identifies the essential characteristic of these self-aware post-modernists; it is understood by Aureli to be a spatial condition having to do with monumental typologies and territorial limits.

Likewise, Hays and Aureli practice different forms of history. In his historically circumscribed examination of the late 70's, Hays offers a Hegelian, historiographical, tautological analysis of architectural history; he is performing the logic of history, not just describing it. In this, he follows in the footsteps of Marx, Peter Burger, Tafuri, and Jameson. Aureli, in his more arbitrary grazing over his historical precedents, in which Ungers is the model for which the past gets evoked, is less historian than cultural critic using history to make an ideological point. In this, he follows in the footsteps of John Ruskin, Geoffrey Scott, and Reyner Banham. Hays, the true heir of Tafuri's and Adorno's "negative" project, to offer any positive prescriptions for architects; Aureli wanting to escape this negativity and unafraid of "operative criticism", offers strategies for a resistant architecture.

Evaluating the relative merits of these two approaches has much to do with personal taste, both come with strengths and weaknesses. Hays's much more constrained, dialectical, linear (Lacanian) narrative forces him, whatever we think of that narrative, into a very nuance and rigorous, if/because completely scripted analysis of his subjects, as they are forced to yield up the validity for his psychoanalysis. Nothing is casual or merely observational here. Like Hegel, whose totalizing approach to history forced him to script every event of humankind ever-so-didactically, Hays forces a seemingly undisputable, singular analysis of the late avant-garde. At the same time, that narrative is so particular a master-narrative that if

you do not subscribe, it is painful to read. It has to be said: the datedness of this type of analysis engenders both anxiety and, for its shear lack of self-consciousness about this datedness, admiration. Aureli's more casual and prescriptive position allows him to speak more freely about his precedents/subjects and more directly to the reader. There is a certain honesty to this approach, where the dialectical nature of his theory (autonomous architecture both rejects urbanism and incorporates the city) is handled clearly, elegantly. Nevertheless, a less arbitrary trip through the western canon would force Aureli to more self-consciously position his understanding of historical movement and the construction of historical narratives.

All of this returns us to the initial question of how to understand the intellectual differences between these two authors, or, more fruitfully, how to take them as indications of the present state of architectural theory. One can't escape the fact that the older Hays represents the last gasp of 80's-90's critical theory; moreover, his move away from an Adornian-Althusserian approach to architectural history to a more internal Lacanian one is not obvious in an era of political, cultural and economic relativity. Aureli, the younger man of the moment, represents a post-post-criticality that resuscitates a political, neo-Marxist agenda on the other side of post-(as-in-non) critical theory, but one that escapes the negativity that made critical theory such a downer. The audience for Aureli's *Absolute Architecture* will surely be larger.

At the same time, the shared distain for post-criticality - overtly identified in Aureli, more than implicit in Hays - is a positive indication that this moment of theory is over. One can talk about the philosophical differences here, but the double-barreled attack they offer on market-driven, acquiescent "theory" is profound. At the same time, the detailed readings that they give the architectural projects under their purview is an indication that theory in the abstract, itself a hallmark of critical theory, is no longer desirable. (Or, perhaps more accurately, theory that was abstract and used to promote certain styles of architecture that had nothing to do with them is no longer evidenced.) Indeed, one can reject either or both of Hays's or Aureli's larger thesis and still be enticed by the analyses they yield. Hays's reading of Rossi refutes the standard labeling of the Italian's types as instantiating "memory" and insists, instead that

they are "aesthetically impoverished" signs that the city cannot yield up, for Rossi, the symbols needed for memory-making; his analysis of Eisenman's grid-repetition-text compulsion is the most convincing yet that Eisenman's work, in playing out the emptiness of architecture-as-visual-exchange, is a consistent attack on reification; his explanation of Hejduk's work as it morphs from wall to animus is a novel, formal and somewhat shocking description of the workings of the Gaze; and Tschumi's interest in new modes of spatial notation is believably described as exploiting the sensuality of the sign, once that sign fails to reference (the sensuality of) architecture itself. Aureli's Palladio is shown to be a master of forms both bombastic for their socio-political generalizations and modest for their proper sense of limits; Piranesi is placed in the context of dueling approaches to cartography, ultimately using his maps for an anti-urban agenda; Boullee is shown to absorb the spatial lessons of Parisian hotels/courtyards, squares/places, and boulevards/axes to make an architecture that, in using these devices, no longer needs the city that generated it; and Ungers is resuscitated from obscurity, providing the model of the architectural archipelago without which Koolhaas would have been unable to conceive "Exodus" or *Delirious New York*. This attention to and close reading of the architectural artifacts harkens back to a period of criticism exemplified by *Oppositions* in the 70's, and there is much to be said for this. And while both authors take the 70's as their paradigmatic period, they clearly both are making claims for our contemporary condition: Hays, implicitly saying that we can only keep playing out the futility of architecture's attempts at signification; Aureli saying that there is value in an architecture resisting urbanization. In both, Koolhaas is contextualized accordingly.

At the same time, the same-old-white-guys approach to architecture history/theory is also once again on display. Of course, one cannot blame these historians for the fact that the periods they look at offered no (well…) female architects. But one can wonder about contemporary architecture's obsession with defining itself vis-a-vis the "masters" and these authors for an obsession with "autonomy" which, in precluding overtly socially-engaged architecture in deference to dialectically engaged architecture, invites no women or people of color to the table. Perhaps the most optimistic thing that can be said about the demonstrated fascination with autonomy offered by these two books is that we are witnessing its swan

song – rich, baroque, fascinating, but soon to pass.