The Modern Nostalgia. Architecture, Autonomy, Philosophy

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The certainty of decadence is perhaps what, consciously or unconsciously, has led the architectural rationale to seek for renovation in the study of the past. But since the immediate past is the natural object of critique, its distant counterpart usually becomes the object of desire. Le Corbusier, for example, praised the aesthetic and functional standards of the machine as much as those of the Parthenon. The new architectural attitude that revolted against the ornament and academic thinking, at the beginning of the twentieth century, reflected on the technical character of the new era without forgetting the lessons of the past. The following lines consider the nostalgic dimension of Modernism, which implies a radical break with the past that nevertheless questions certain aspects of the new beginning. Because nostalgia is inherent to any revolution whose internal contradiction is explained by its French and Latin etymological origins: "the recurrence of a point or period of time." The more radical the revolution, the more nostalgic.

The failure of the heroic aspirations of Modernism stimulated a critique that broadened the architectural scope, geographically and thematically, during the 1960s — Team X (Great Britain), Metabolism (Japan), or the legacy of Ernesto Rogers (Italy) are some examples of this critical attitude. This paper focuses on the autonomy of architecture derived from the revision of the complexity of Modernism undertaken by Rogers. It explores an idea of modernity rooted in the Enlightenment that links the idealism of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux with that of Le Corbusier through the introduction of the term "autonomy" into architecture by the Viennese historian Emil Kaufmann, during the third decade of the twentieth century. The paper argues that the critical character of autonomy, inherited from Immanuel Kant's "autonomy of the will," has persisted as a cultural critique until today through the political and historical dimension of architectural form theorized by the Italian architect Pier Vittorio Aureli.

The analogy between Ledoux's architecture and Kant's philosophy, formulated by Kaufmann, gave birth to the critical character of architectural autonomy. In the book Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier. Ursprung und Entwicklung der autonomen Architektur [From Ledoux to Le Corbusier. Origin and Development of Autonomous Architecture, 1933], Kaufmann identified Ledoux's pavilion-like architecture as a challenge to the heteronomy of the Baroque unity. He considered that the second project of the Saltworks of Chaux (1774) represented an emerging modern architecture rather than the decay of Baroque. The formalism of the Kantian system, based on the immanent values of reason, paralleled the formalism of Ledoux's architecture, based on

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1 Le Corbusier, Jean-Louis Cohen, and John Goodman, Toward an Architecture (Los Angeles, California: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 180-181.
3 Emil Kaufmann, De Ledoux a Le Corbusier: Origen Y Desarrollo De La Arquitectura Autónoma, translated by Reinald Bernet (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, Colección Punto Y Linea, 1982).
4 Kaufmann, De Ledoux a Le Corbusier, 29.
geometric simplicity and material sincerity. The stone was considered stone again, as Kaufmann stated.6 Ledoux left behind the animism and ornamental excesses of the sculptor-architect of the Baroque, such as Bernini or Borromini.

The humanism of Rousseau and the rationalism of Kant synthesized the sentiments of the eighteenth century; the tension between the romanticism of Baudelaire and the economism of Marx characterized the nineteenth century; and the revolutionary efforts of the Bauhaus (1919-1933) and the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne CIAM (1928-1959) responded to the technical character of the twentieth century.7 Two years after the closure of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius wrote that “the aesthetic satisfaction of the human soul” was as important as the “structural functions, and the concentration of concise and economical solutions” for the New Architecture.8 He goes on criticizing the “academic conventions” of the last two generations of architects who fell prey of “a florid aestheticism,” omitting the recent technical development and relegating urban planning. Standardization of the processes of life would liberate the individual to develop its humanity freely rather than robotize its existence. Gropius rejected the idea of a “Bauhaus Style,” formula, dogma, or “preconceived ideas of form.” The Bauhaus “sought the vital spark of life behind life’s ever-changing forms.”9 The search for revitalizing forms of the Bauhaus, thus, did not focus on the production of material objects. This is attested by the different interpretations that its pedagogy informed. In 1963, Tomás Maldonado responded to the question: “Is the Bauhaus relevant today?” by arguing that the Bauhaus was not only a pedagogical model or an artistic and architectural movement. Maldonado pointed out that an

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9 Ibid., 62.
“often proclaimed but never realized” Bauhaus was relevant, in the 1960s — a Bauhaus that unsuccessfully “open up a humanistic view of a technological civilization.”

Pier Vittorio Aureli declared that the Bauhaus produced much more than objects or prototypes. He considered that the school also produced the cultural context necessary for their reception: “we don’t need new objects, new prototypes but we need a new process of understanding them. We need new cultural scenarios in which these objects would produce a completely different meaning.”

In the same way that Aureli proposes to learn from the Bauhaus today, the modern masters built on tradition to innovate. Thus, what tends to be characterized as the modern rejection of the past can be interpreted as a rejection of inherited truths that were not scrutinized by any critical reflection. In a lecture titled “To Free Oneself Entirely of Academic Thinking” (1929), Le Corbusier defined an “academician” as follows:

“One who does not judge by himself,  
Who accepts results without verifying their causes,  
Who believes in absolute truths,  
Who does not involve his own self in every question.”

If we recall the Enlightenment credo “Sapere aude! (Dare to know or dare to use your own understanding!” evoked by Kant in resemblance to his own autonomy and its rejection of the heteronomy of choice of past philosophies—it could be argued that Le Corbusier advocated for the autonomy of architecture in relation to academism. Le Corbusier considers that “academism means accepting forms, methods, concepts because they exist, without asking why.” On the other hand, as explained by Theodor Adorno, Kant accepted the authority of science in the constitution of knowledge, but he questioned “how” science acquired its authority. Kant, thus, provided not only the means of criticism but also a self-critique of reason. This parallel between Kant’s and Le Corbusier’s respective arguments strengthens the bold claim, put forward by Kaufmann, that the alliance between Kant’s philosophy and Ledoux’s architecture constitutes the descendance of Le Corbusier’s architecture. Le Corbusier concludes the lecture, praising the calculations and synthesis of engineers and evoking the past:

“Today I am considered a revolutionary. I shall confess to you that I have had only one teacher: the past; only one education: the study of the past.”

In this passage Le Corbusier does not clarify what the term “past” conveys, but Gropius, in The New Architecture and the Bauhaus (1935), helps us to understand the meaning of tradition within modern architecture. He wrote that the neoclassicism of Schinkel was part of his heritage, thus, he denied any conflict between the New Architecture and tradition. “Respect for tradition,” Gropius argued, “does not mean the complacent toleration of elements which have been a matter of fortuitous chance or of individual eccentricity; nor does it mean the acceptance of domination by bygone aesthetic forms.” On the contrary, “respect for tradition” meant “the preservation of essentials in the process of striving to get at what lies at the back of all materials and every technique, by giving resemblance to the one with the intelligent aid of the other.”

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14 Le Corbusier, Precisions, 32-33.
16 Le Corbusier, Precisions, 33.
However, the Modern Movement didn’t resist the passage of time. It was incapable of responding to the challenges of the second half of the twentieth century—the postwar economic boom in Europe or the demographic explosion and urban development on the other side of the Atlantic. During this pivotal moment, architecture diversified its discourse by building on the content and method of other disciplines or cultural realms—such as linguistic analogies, the historical memory of Aldo Rossi and Robert Venturi, the biological analogy of the Japanese Metabolism, the scientific methods of Christopher Alexander, the anthropological approach of Kevin Lynch, or pop art explored by Alison and Peter Smithson as well as Denise Scott Brown. According to Reyner Banham, architecture polarized into “tradition” and “technology”—between “history” and “science”—in the 1960s. Banham’s observation is mainly practical because, as previously mentioned, even the break proposed by the modern masters built, at least in theory, on the lessons of the past. In those years, the battle between the technological approach of Banham and the Italian tradition was fought in the pages of the British journal *The Architectural Review* and the Italian *Casabella*. While Banham criticized an Italian architecture dressed in old clothes, the disciples of Ernesto Rogers, *La Tendenza* led by Aldo Rossi, proposed the return to a disciplinary dignity as a reaction against: first, the political apathy of the architectural discourse; second, a creative crisis disguised as interdisciplinary panacea; and third, a professionalism concerned with personal profit subjected to the commodification of culture.

The formation of the autonomy of architecture in Italy—during the second half of the twentieth century—was influenced not only by Emil Kaufmann’s scholarship but also by the philosophy of Galvano della Volpe, the writings of the historians Rudolf Wittkower and Hans Sedlmayr, the dialectics of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer as well as the sympathy for the Italian Communist Party. Its context was a debate about the importance of history within architecture before the development of mass culture and the degradation of the modern city derived from the postwar economic boom that precipitated the process of modernization. Typological concerns and the consideration of the city of the past as a point of reference for architecture, developed by Saverio Muratori and Ludovico Quaroni, respectively, stimulated the next generation comprised by Aldo Rossi, Manfredo Tafuri, Carlo Aymonino, Paolo Portoghesi and Giorgio Grassi, among others. The historical concerns of the Italian tradition informed, years later, the theme of the first international exhibition of the Venice Architecture Biennale 1980 curated by Paolo Portoghesi, *La Presenza del Passato* [The Presence of the Past], which opened a debate about the future of architecture in relation to its past. Portoghesi would refer to Jürgen Habermas, three years later, to evoke the first time that the term “modern” was used “at the end of the fifth century to distinguish the by then official Christian presence from the pagan-Roman past.” The modern feeling attested to the consciousness of a new age in Europe ever since—the time of Charlemagne, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment. But evoking “The Presence of the Past,” Portoghesi condemned the lack of attention to “the Renaissance paradox of ‘refound antiquity’.”

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18 Alison and Peter Smithson published in 1956 the essay titled “But Today We Collect Ads” exploring the relationship between pop art and architecture, while Denise Scott Brown’s “Learning from Pop” (1971) anticipated the theoretical reflection on social values communicated across space of Learning from Las Vegas (1972).


22 Portoghesi pointed out that “In early Renaissance texts, it is in fact not rare to find the terms modern and moderns referred not to new, but to old culture, to Gothic culture, for many years the dominating culture, opposed by humanistic thought.” See Paolo Portoghesi, “The re-emergence of archetypes,” *Controspazio* XII 1-6 (1980): 2.
Aldo Rossi considered that the roots of modern architecture grew from the rationalism of the Enlightenment. In “Emil Kaufmann e l’architettura dell’illuminismo” [Emil Kaufmann and the architecture of the Enlightenment, 1958], Rossi wrote that it is impossible to carry out a study of the architecture of the Age of Reason without considering its historical motives—its relationship with the revolution.23 He highlighted two aspects of Kaufmann’s scholarship: first, his committed search for aesthetic distinction and originality within an homogeneous cultural framework; and second, the rigorous study of the architecture of the eighteenth century—forgotten by the nineteenth century—as the beginning of modern architecture, because it emerged from social problems.24 This is arguably why Rossi refused to be labelled as a postmodern architect. He declared that, if any, he could be considered a premodern architect. This declaration made in an interview published in Architectural Design (1982) emphasizes an important aspect of Rossi’s architectural theory: the influence of the Enlightenment and its architecture on the rationalism of the autonomy of architecture that responded to social and political concerns through the return to a committed discipline during the twentieth century.25

Rossi explored, consciously or unconsciously, the Kaufmannian lineage—from Ledoux to Le Corbusier—in his contributions to the journal Casabella-Continuità. In different essays devoted to Adolf Loos, Peter Behrens, Le Corbusier, as well as the periphery of the city, he emphasized not only the link between architecture and its social causes and consequences but also between architecture and other cultural realms such as cinema. In “Adolf Loos: 1870-1933” (1960), Rossi argued that the indictment of the ornament, famously formulated by Loos, was already an echo of the rational culture of the Enlightenment and neoclassical architecture.26 Goethe, he wrote, denounced the artistic ornamentation as a sign of a general immorality of the Zeitgeist and condemned the weakening of architecture due to its ornamentation. In “Peter Behrens e il problema dell’abitazione moderna” [Peter Behrens and the problem of modern housing, 1960], Rossi explains the influence of Behrens in modern architecture that helped transform the cities and study the sociopolitical dimension of housing. Since the beginning of his career, Behrens explored the rational construction of affordable housing—its materials, its structure and even its furniture—advocating for the study of the Siedlung due to its efficiency.27

In “Il convento de la Tourette di Le Corbusier” [The convent of La Tourette by Le Corbusier, 1960], Rossi argues that the increasingly diffused disciplinary boundaries and the abstraction of theories devoid of concrete examples legitimize the latent tensions within Le Corbusier’s oeuvre. Because Le Corbusier provides solutions that are both poetic and practical. Rossi praises Le Corbusier’s dictum, “Une maison est une machine à habiter” [A house is a machine for living in], not only as the most relevant description of the house functioning in modern architecture but also as the most revolutionary definition of Modernism. He insisted in the innovative character of Le Corbusier’s oeuvre within the Italian context where a new academicism fell into professionalism and conformism.28 Thus, from Ledoux to Le Corbusier—via Loos and Behrens—Rossi’s writings advocated for a rational architecture that responded to sociopolitical conditions that emerged from their respective historical context. Rossi found in this lineage a continuity based on the inherent social structure of modern architecture, rooted on the alliance between architecture and revolution during the eighteenth century—the Age of Reason that influenced the subsequent development of Western thinking. The autonomy of architecture—formulated by Kaufmann, in the 1930s, and echoed by Rossi decades later—is not synonymous

27 Aldo Rossi, “Peter Behrens e il problema dell’abitazione moderna,” Casabella-Continuità 240 (1960).
with isolation but rather with engagement. An autonomous architecture represents the study of the cultural values of architecture—the social, economic and political conditions that determine its development but, at the same time, to which the formal principles of architecture do not subordinate. The adjective “autonomous” provides a free space, for architecture, to imagine an alternative to reality. Thus, autonomy implies a paradoxical critical engagement rather than an apathetic isolation.

In 1966, the publications of L’Architettura della Città [The Architecture of the City] by Aldo Rossi and Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture by Robert Venturi both revitalized architectural theory but from contrasting perspectives. The former explored the immanent values of form through collective memory and typology, while the latter proposed the plural references from which architecture could draw upon such as pop art, mannerism, anthropology or semiotics. The different arguments of these books informed the subsequent debate about the autonomy of architecture that got a new impulse led by the rationalism of Aldo Rossi, in Europe, and Peter Eisenman, in the United States. While Eisenman drew upon the formal sensibility of Giuseppe Terragni to theorize the process of making of an autonomous architectural object, Rossi built on the rationalism of the Enlightenment supporting the thesis—put forward by the Viennese art historian Emil Kaufmann—that Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s architecture represented the beginning of modern architecture rather than the end of the Baroque. Thus, the autonomy of architecture developed in Europe differed from its American counterpart. The Italian interpretation engaged, socially and politically, with a rationalism that precipitated the outbreak of the paradigmatic French Revolution that represented a turning point for the development of Western societies. On the other hand, in the United States, the rationalism of the most radical interpretations of architectural autonomy led to disciplinary isolation exacerbating the distance “Between Culture and Form.”

The autonomy of architecture built on forms of knowledge and cultural realms, external to architecture, to develop its theory. Rossi built on the relationship between the architectural type and urban form to study the cultural formation of an engaged discipline. He explored the idea of type as a cultural element whose transformation relies on a gradual process that involves collective memory—a transformation rooted on, what Eisenman calls, “ground zero” or a type form. Rossi not only built on the historical unfolding of architecture to formulate its autonomy but also on the content and method of other disciplines or cultural realms—such as urban ecology, economy, sociology, geography, and even cinema. In the introduction to the Portuguese edition of The Architecture of the City, Rossi wrote that despite the critique against his supposedly detached autonomy, he never spoke of an isolated discipline of architecture:

“I purposely limited myself to citing architects rarely but scholars from other disciplines frequently, beginning with geographers and historians. I also purposely refrained from placing a precise boundary between ancient and modern architects. It might seem strange that someone concerned with defining the boundaries of the ‘corpus’ of architectural studies should make use of theses from disciplines outside of architecture, but in fact I have never spoken of an absolute autonomy of architecture or of an architecture an sich, as some presume I have; I have primarily been concerned with establishing some of the characteristic propositions of architecture.”

29 Michael Hays reflected on the relationship between culture and the formal parameters of the discipline of architecture using the architecture of Mies van der Rohe as case study, but he paradoxically exacerbates the distance between both by theorizing the space in between rather than accepting that both constitute each other. This view is part of the antagonistic tendency of architectural theory to exclude what architecture is not. See K. Michael Hays, “Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form,” Perspecta 21 (1984).


Rossi built on the theoretical and practical methods of cinema to study his interest in the transformation of the urban environment of mid-twentieth century. In “La città e la periferia” [The city and the periphery, 1961], he wrote that the periphery was the future of the city. Rossi advocated for a harmonic social and economic development that could integrate the forces that constitute both city and periphery. The city constructed itself through groups of houses or interconnected functions and forms rather than single and isolated units, posing not only technical but also ideological challenges. Rossi argued that to seek for answers in the technical proposals of the modern movement would be anti-historical but recalls the sociological premises proposed by Walter Gropius to the development of affordable housing for industrial communities based on standardization. Rossi pointed out how art—especially cinema and literature—was relevant in the discovery of a profound social crisis through its focus on the social conditions of the urban periphery. He condemned the pathetic vitality of a moral degradation of the population that lives in the periphery for which the city represents a distant image. This pathetic urban reality, found in Rome and Milan, was captured by Pasolini, Visconti or Fellini in their films through the degradation, not only of the physical context, but also the internal world of the individual characters who face the alienation brought by the modern city.

The current unfolding of the twenty-first century demonstrates that the tension between the individual and its (social, economic, and political) context is far from being resolved. According to the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells, the search for collective and individual identities that permeates our contemporary societies provides the main source of social meaning within an increasingly interconnected information age. This tension between individual and collective consciousness becomes concrete in the racial tensions, exacerbated by the rise of nationalism in international politics, the migration crises throughout the world, and the degradation of our natural environment which, in turn, reflect the degradation of social, political and economic conditions. Rossi considered that Modernism, in architecture, emerged from social problems. Thus, it is not particularly controversial to propose that we should learn from Modernism, otherwise architecture and urbanism could fall—or will keep falling—into decoration or innovation as categories of economic and aesthetic speculation.

Despite the accurate indictment of reason developed by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the Enlightenment still reverberates today. Adorno and Horkheimer denounced that the eighteenth-century development of rationality led to the barbarism of fascism and the irrationality of capitalist production during the twentieth century. But, paradoxically, their indictment of the irrationality of rationality was only possible through a rational analysis and a not less rational verdict. Nobody can escape from failure, culture and reason are not exceptions. But this does not mean that we should abandon the critical nature, the critical lesson, of reason to embrace a social and political agnosticism. On the contrary, we must use the means of criticism to renovate the cultural values of architecture and denounce our cultural failures as society.

In the 1960s, the art critic Clement Greenberg and the Mexican poet Octavio Paz wrote about the legacy of the modernist project and its historical continuity. Greenberg wrote, “I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of the self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as the first real modernist.” Paz, on the other hand, asserted that trying to be modern is non-sense, we are condemned to be modern because the present and the past are

prohibited to us. The “presentism” of Paz could be easily denounced but if we understand his outcry as our appropriation of the critical lessons of Kant through our own means, perhaps we should undoubtedly aspire to be modern. We must strive to learn from its critical legacy.

The Italian architect Pier Vittorio Aureli represents the last link of the theoretical genealogy of architectural autonomy. He focused on the political dimension of *The Project of Autonomy* rather than the philosophical foundation formulated by Kaufmann. The critical character of Aureli’s autonomy of architecture derives from the intellectual and political movements *Operaism* and *Autonomia* that developed in Italy while the theory of Aldo Rossi matured. During the 1960s, the communist position of *Operaism* proposed the autonomy of the political within the working class which implied the empowerment of the workers vis-à-vis capitalism to influence the evolution of capital itself. By the end of the decade, *Autonomia* condemned the leftist institutions as the embodiment of cultural and social sclerosis within the capitalist logic. Aureli explains that the application of the *operaist* autonomy of the political to concrete places rather than to urban planning corresponded to the Rossian theory of the city that focused on “exceptions and singularities.” Thus, the specificity of architectural form was analogous to the autonomy of the political claimed by the working class, as opposed to Tafuri’s theory in which the city is constituted by production systems that tend to absorb or discriminate any form of singularity.

The autonomy of architecture, developed by Rossi and *La Tendenza*, is often regarded as a melancholic outcry—a shallow verdict that omits, or ignores, the positive legacy of a Modernism (a break, a critical attitude) constituted, like the most radical revolution, by nostalgia. Rossi’s architectural autonomy countered the degradation of the modern city, but what once was a legitimate cultural critique has become disciplinary retardation today.

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38 Ibid., 8-9.

39 Ibid., 53.

Aureli theorizes the social and political dimension of architectural form to confront the processes of urbanization, but he is cautious. He considers that, today, an architectural way of thinking has become more important than architectural form itself.\(^{41}\) This is partly explained by how the new means of communication and transportation in the constitution of the spatial urban structure of the twenty-first century challenge the traditional spatial structure of the city that could be traced back to the Renaissance architectural treatises. Aureli builds on the theoretical lessons of the intellectual and political movements Operaism and Autonomia. However, he argues for the relevance of the theoretical method of autonomy today, while he recognizes that its content is obsolete (the unrealized Marxist prophecy of the revolution of the proletariat). The same seems to apply to the method of the architectural autonomy developed by Rossi that is as relevant today as it was in the 1960s (a critical approach that countered the degradation of the modern city and the populism of interdisciplinary approaches that mask a disciplinary crisis incapable of tackling pressing urban issues), but whose content did not resist the passage of time (the decreasing relevance of the concreteness of architectural form as the main experience of the urban spatial structure).

“Nowadays, there is no architecture, only buildings and architects.” The Italian historian Camillo Boito used these words to describe the status of the discipline of architecture in the nineteenth century. A century later, the Italian architect Massimo Scolari borrowed Boito’s statement to condemn the lack of disciplinary principles and cultural substance of the Italian architecture of the 1970s.\(^{42}\) Four decades later, it is not particularly controversial to claim that Boito’s words still haunt architecture and urbanism within a context where the ill-equipped architect and urbanist, like musicians without a musical score, confront the urban challenges of a twenty-first century that have reached a global scale.

The picturesqueness of the information economy—embodied by Instagram, Facebook, or ArchDaily—lacks the critical character of the analogy between modern philosophy (Kant) and modern architecture (Ledoux) whose formation gave birth to the autonomy of architecture. This paper advocates for the development of a historical consciousness to renovate the contemporary architectural and urban discourse through the study of the past rather than its rejection or its omission. After all, Italo Calvino reminded us in *Invisible Cities* that “desires are already memories.”\(^{43}\)

REFERENCE LIST:


Rossi, Aldo. “Peter Behrens e il problema dell’abitazione moderna.” Casabella-Continuità 240 (1960).


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