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Marx, architecture and modernity

David Cunningham & Jon Goodbun

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Although its obituaries continue to be popularly disseminated, Marxist thinking remains a significant intellectual force within contemporary cultural and critical theory, if not, so clearly, within mass politics. Indeed, in many respects, it seems healthier, leaner and more active in these areas than it has been for some time, renewed both by contemporary discourses surrounding globalization and the anti-capitalist movement, and by various recent theoretical developments from Britain and North America to continental Europe and South America. More often than not such activity has been fed by a belated return to the writings of Marx himself. One thinks of Antonio Negri's seminal post-workerist readings of the *Grundrisse*, David Harvey's revisiting of the 1848 Manifesto, or the recent resurrection of debates surrounding the Hegelian character of Marx's *Capital*, and its implications for contemporary philosophy and social theory.¹ Equally, one thinks of Jacques Derrida's influential and (at its time of writing) untimely intervention in *Specters of Marx*, or of Gilles Deleuze who died before completing a book he intended to call *Grandeur de Marx*. At the same time, Marx is increasingly proclaimed, as much on the right as on the left, to be the great prophet of contemporary globalisation; a prophet who, once stripped of his articulation of an alternative (communist) future uncoiling itself from within the very structures of the capitalist present, can be perversely 'accepted by leading theorists of the American business class' as the one thinker who actually reveals 'the true nature of capitalism'.² While there is much about this that should (and does) disquiet us – as the production of a 'Marx' devoid of all revolutionary fervour - it indicates why the writings of a thinker that Foucault once described as the author of an entire 'discourse' should appear, yet again, to have become the terrain upon which a series of current debates are destined to be fought out.

At the very least, what the contemporary ideologues of globalisation recognise is that Marx matters today because he was, perhaps, *the* thinker, not only of nineteenth-century capitalism, but of ‘capitalism in itself’. As one commentator puts it, the ‘actuality’ of *das Kapital* is ‘that of its object...capital itself – an insatiable vampire and fetish-automaton now more invasive than ever’.³ With the dramatic implosion of ‘historical communism’ in Eastern Europe, and the accelerated absorption of non-Western societies into the resurgent regimes of capital accumulation that it helped to generate, Marx’s analyses of ‘capitalism in itself’ are thus of increasing, not decreasing, relevance; though accompanying this is a demand that they not become petrified again in the suffocating grip of doctrinal ‘orthodoxy’. A return to Marx today is not, or should not be, a return to the Same and the already given.⁴ Still, if ‘capital obviously does not operate in the way it did in the nineteenth century...yet it operates’. And, whatever its flaws (which remain open to debate), we do not have a better starting point for its critical analysis than Marx.⁵

It was with this in mind that we organised, in May 2004, a small one-day colloquium at the University of Westminster in London which sought to bring some of these trans-disciplinary debates to bear upon the discipline of architecture; a colloquium, and a general idea, that appears to have generated some interest and, hence, seems worth recounting and exploring further here.⁶ In inviting various people to contribute to this discussion, we were guided by a concern to engage the implications for architectural knowledge of what appear to us to be three particularly significant (and, in one sense, ‘heretical’) developments of Marxian thought, each of which possesses considerable contemporary resonance.

The first of these, and the most directly architectural, is the body of work authored by Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice School, and its ongoing dissemination and extension through the work of Anglophone theorists such as Frederic Jameson. Although Tafuri's work continues, slowly, to gain respect across the broader field of cultural studies, architectural theory has, paradoxically, largely avoided confronting and developing this difficult legacy; perhaps precisely because of the difficult questions it raises for the architectural profession itself. Justified by simplistic accusations of ‘structural pessimism’ and lack of a ‘specific methodology for architectural activity’, neglect looks increasingly like mere *evasion* of some uncomfortable issues.⁷ Anthony Vidler and Gail Day’s recent critical engagements present an honourable exception, and, as they demonstrated in their papers at the

colloquium, both are, not coincidentally, distinguished by an attention to the properly Marxist dimensions of Tafuri's oeuvre.

By contrast to Tafuri's relative neglect, the enormity of both Walter Benjamin's and Henri Lefebvre's respective contributions to a thinking about *spatial* culture has at least succeeded in achieving widespread recognition, (if at times superficially), in architectural and urbanist circles. The recent interventions of Marxist or 'post-Marxist' urbanists and geographers (such as Harvey and Castells), who have been inspired by Lefebvre in particular, is one of the most promising of recent developments. In the case of Benjamin, it is in the potential he provides for something like a *phenomenological* account of urban *experience* that his influence has been perhaps most profoundly felt, generating the groundwork for a vast array of contemporary theoretical projects. Together, although they in fact represent quite distinct legacies, it's fair to say that Benjamin and Lefebvre have been the guiding theoretical lights for an elaboration of a specifically 'culturalist' (as opposed to sociological-empirical) approach to the urban⁸ that has had an almost unprecedented impact upon architectural history and theory in recent times. It was from this position that, in their respective papers at the colloquium, Iain Borden outlined a possible Marxian phenomenology grounded in a Lefebvrian rhythm-analysis of everyday space, and Jane Rendell attempted to counsel the "unhappy marriage" of Marxism and feminism.

The third strand we identified in the colloquium, which to some degree mediates the concerns of the others, is the recent (often broadly philosophical) reviews of Marxist thought developed around the histories and theories of the avant-garde, taking up the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School as well as the artistic practices of Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, and their heirs.⁹ Peter Osborne's writings on the 'architectural turn' in post-conceptual art practice and culture would be one key instance of this, emphasising the socio-political underpinnings of this 'turn', as a desired engagement with art's institutional structuring and its opening out on to the city beyond.¹⁰ More broadly, the question of the avant-garde raises here the issue of what role might still be played, today, by imaginings of a qualitatively different *non-capitalist* future at a moment when, as Tafuri unceasingly reminds us, such imaginings may simply provide ideological and aesthetic cover for the ongoing reproduction of capitalism itself.¹¹

If each of these strands inherits a Marxian discourse in some way, such

inheritance is never a simple process. A legacy is neither automatic nor homogenous, and true inheritance is always, in some part of itself, a kind of betrayal, as it must be to be true at all. We do not wish here, therefore, to speak *for* the participants in the discussion we have sought to initiate, or to corral them into a unified theory of ‘Marx, Architecture and Modernity’. Rather we want to respond, often obliquely, to the questions they have helped us to articulate, and, in doing so, to offer the reader some broad account of just a few of the issues that might be at stake in all this.

Marx. Architecture

What then would constitute the relationship between the terms ‘Marx’ and ‘Architecture’? Indeed, what do we want to signify by ‘Marx’? We have, clearly, the historical nineteenth-century figure Karl Marx and his known writings (both the published texts and notebooks). And it is clear from these that Marx did not set out anything like a coherent Marxist theory of architecture upon which we could draw. Nor, for that matter, did he set out a coherent Marxist theory of either aesthetics or space (a point that will be returned to). Yet, his texts are full of a range of suggestive architectural, spatial and bodily references.

Engels famously described Marx’s project as coming out of the synthesis of three strands of European thought: economics (British), politics (French), and philosophy (German). Architectural knowledge at times must deal with similar syntheses, and so it is perhaps not surprising that it provides some fertile material for Marx. It is worth setting out what some of this material is. There are firstly the texts that deal directly with an urban (and, thus, implicitly architectural) subject matter, such as the section on the country and the city in the *German Ideology* of 1845, and in the 1848 *Manifesto*, or the constant references and comments on the processes and effects of industrial urbanisation. There are also texts on housing and urbanism by Marx’s collaborator Engels. More generally, and significantly for our concerns, there is a sense in which, for Marx, the basic productive ‘impulses’ of the ‘architectural’ and the ‘urban’ are understood as co-originary with the human itself. Or at least, human consciousness is for his ‘philosophy’, as he began to develop it from the early 1840s, simultaneously produced through the act of producing an environment; an environment, a worked matter, which is understood as both alienated and alienating consciousness.¹² Marx must thus be understood as both, first, a theorist of human production generally, and, second, a theorist of capitalist production in particular. He

provides the theoretical foundations for his own relevance, as it were, by initially theorising how the human is produced, and then looking at our particular historical form of that production.

It would be interesting to relate this to, for example, the recent arguments of Edward Soja who, drawing on the archaeological research of Kathleen Kenyon and James Mellaart, asserts the existence of what he calls a First Urban Revolution, essentially co-terminous with human society as such, beginning in Southwest Asia over 10,000 years ago - the development of *pre*-agricultural urban settlements of hunters, gatherers and traders that he identifies with the 'spatially specific' urban forms to be found at Jericho in the Jordan Valley and Çatal Hüyük in southern Anatolia. This inversion of the usual historical narrative, in which the agricultural 'revolution' precedes the urban, has profound consequences for rethinking any 'natural-historical' account of the human, and for the *phenomenological* implications (to which we will return below) of what Soja describes as a process, beginning 'with the body', by which the human is produced through a 'complex relation with our surroundings'. The social is, as Marx implicitly recognised, 'always at the same time intrinsically spatial'.¹³ Expanding the term 'building' to 'city' or 'metropolis', we can understand, then, the workings of a broader dialectic of architectural production, consciousness, alienation and experience perpetually at work in Marx's writings (if somewhat marginalized in their development). The discourse of Marx and the discourse that emerged around space simultaneously co-developed out of Young Hegelian preoccupations with the relationship between matter and spirit. These are thus texts that share concerns with architectural thought, and which make his infiltration into architectural theory possible. A key example would be from his early writings, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, composed in 1843-4.¹⁴ Here Marx outlines what can be read as something like a body-based materialist phenomenology of technology, located in the notion that man 'is affirmed in the objective world not only in the act of thinking, but with all his senses'.¹⁵ The senses, Marx famously writes, have become 'theoreticians in their immediate praxis... Apart from these direct organs, *social* organs are therefore created in the *form* of society...[as] a mode of appropriation of human life'.¹⁶ For Marx, the (collective and 'individual') subject is, as Etienne Balibar states, '*nothing other than practice* which has already begun and continues indefinitely'.¹⁷ As this early 'natural-historical' account would have it, the biological species, therefore, only *becomes human* when it

begins to *produce* its own environment through social co-operation. In this sense what Marx means by the economic is, most fundamentally, a mediation between social and biological aspects. Production is the source of a ‘universality’ which makes the ‘whole of nature’ man’s ‘*inorganic* body’.¹⁸ Nature becomes, via *technics*, a prosthetic extension which defines the human itself, in the sense that the human is *intrinsically* (rather than merely secondarily) prosthetic. The technical is, as Bernard Stiegler has insisted (thinking of both Marx and Heidegger), more than a ‘tool’: it is a condition of the *invention* of the human itself.¹⁹ The significance of such an idea for an expanded conception of architectural praxis, and of the historical logic of the urban, should be apparent.

Indebted, no doubt, to a certain German Romantic tradition of aesthetic philosophy in general, and spatial aesthetic theory in particular - which we know Marx was reading, and continued to read, throughout his life – texts such as this suggest that, in its original formulations and sources, one way of understanding the Marxist ‘synthesis’ of economics, politics and philosophy would be through the use of *aesthetic* structures in economic and political formations. Thus in Marx’s later move toward an apparently ‘purer’ economic focus, in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, certain aesthetic models can still be found at work both within the analysis of the form of the commodity-object itself, and within the concept of commodity fetishism.²⁰ In a sense, much of Benjamin’s most famous work – probably without any direct influence from Marx’s early writings – starts from here, though, typically, its ‘roots’ in Marxian thought tend to be occluded by many of his most enthusiastic proponents in contemporary cultural and urban studies. And, again, this is not without direct relevance to architectural questions. In a famous passage towards the end of ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin writes:

Buildings have been man’s companions since primeval times. Many art forms have developed and perished...[But] architecture has never been idle. Its history is more ancient than that of any art, and its claim to being a living force has significance in every attempt to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art...[The] mode of appropriation, developed with reference to architecture, in certain circumstances acquires canonical value. For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved

by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit.²¹

In this conception - that the 'mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence...determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well' - we have the basis for an entire Marxian-phenomenological account of the architectural as spatial practice.

If the terms of phenomenology can seem dubious in contemporary architectural theory, and unlikely to intersect with a Marxist thought, it is, no doubt, because of the ethico-sentimental conservatism which has tended to define such thinking in recent decades. Typically, architectural phenomenologies, such as those of Christian Norberg Schultz, Dalibor Veselý, or Juhani Pallasmaa (to name some of the more successful) have all tended in various ways to problematically essentialise and dehistoricise the experiencing body, emphasising the supposedly 'timeless' and 'natural', confusing philosophical methods and polemical ambitions. Whilst one might sympathise with the desires to ameliorate the alienating effects of spectacle and rampant consumer capitalism that often seem to animate these discourses, one must maintain the demand for a sober historical phenomenology that accounts for the body's ever shifting interaction with its environment; an interaction which has undergone fundamental and irreversible change in the 'second nature' of capitalist modernity. This is not to deny that there are components of our bodies and environments that undergo very slow change, and a sophisticated Marxian phenomenology might unravel the simultaneous and competing spatialities and temporalities at work in our experiencing. Indeed it is perhaps in the nearly timeless, and therefore, at one level, effectively 'pre-capitalist', slow rhythms of the body, that we might find the basis for some forms of future resistance to the commodification of our bodies and environments. Yet this does not efface the need for a properly socio-historical account of our 'complex relation with our surroundings'.

At the same time, undoing the largely conservative determinations of phenomenology is often hampered by the dominantly iconographic (rather than properly spatial) model which now drives, inside and outside of the academy, a contemporary understanding of architectural meaning; and which requires us to revise somewhat Benjamin's assertions regarding architecture's non-auratic character. This itself takes place in a cultural context in which a select group of architects are

increasingly fêted as *the* great figures of artistic genius and power in our time. Intensifying what Tafuri saw as the irreversible reduction of its socially transformative ambitions to a ‘form without utopia...to sublime uselessness’,²² such uselessness has itself, paradoxically if inevitably, proved to be of great ideological use to the contemporary imperatives of capital accumulation. The contemporary ‘drama’ of architecture thus appears, dominantly, as one of spectacle and brand image. As against this, the essential Marxist task should become one of reconceiving a genuinely modernist conception of spatial practice as the condition for architectural knowledge, that is, the production of a *phenomenological* account of the spatio-temporal forms through which the distinctive social relations of capitalist modernity are reproduced and extended. While architecture cannot itself overcome such relations, in its reflection upon them it can at least promote a lucid awareness of their conditions, and an understanding of the new forms of subjective experience that it produces. This would seem to us to be the basis for a broadly Marxian analysis today.

Modernity

What about our third term then – modernity? How might a ‘return’ to the writings of Marx inform our specific understanding of architecture and modernity, and of their interrelation, at this point? For Marshall Berman, famously, Marx and Engels’ 1848 *Communist Manifesto* is an expression of some of modernism’s ‘deepest insights [which], at the same time, dramatizes some of its deepest inner contradictions’, both one of the classic texts of political ‘modernism’, and ‘the archetype of a century of modernist manifestos and movements to come’.²³ And, in the passage that provides the title for Berman’s *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, we find a brilliant account of modernity by Marx himself:

It [the bourgeoisie] has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put into the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades. The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted

disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeoisie epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. The need for a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. [...] The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and thus rescued a considerable part of the population from rural idiocy.²⁴

Noting the presence of architecture and the urban at both ends of this very famous passage, we should say something of what we understand by the terms ‘modernity’ and ‘modernism’ in relation to these paradigmatically spatial discourses.

For Berman, this passage describes – precisely in *phenomenological*, as well as socio-economic fashion (though the two cannot in fact be separated) – the *experience* of modernity (Berman’s subtitle). Modernity here embraces both what he terms *modernization* - the general process of socio-economic and technological development - and *modernism* - the various cultural and/or ‘subjective’ responses to this process of modernization - and, to a degree that Berman himself fails to bring out, modernity articulates something of the *shared* spatio-temporal form of both. As Osborne puts it, in what may be regarded, in part, as a reading of the Marx passage, modernity, in these terms, refers to something like a ‘*culture of temporal abstraction*’:

[Modernity] defines a distinctive structure of historical experience. Nonetheless, the unity of this structure notwithstanding, its concrete meanings are subject to significant historical variation, relative to the specific terms and boundaries of the various fields of experience that are subjected to its temporal logic, and to the specific modes of negation that are employed. [...] ‘Modernity’ is the name for an actually existing, or socially realised, temporal formalism that is constitutive of certain formations of subjectivity. It is in this

sense that it is a distinctively ‘cultural’ category: the fundamental form of time-consciousness in capitalist societies.²⁵

Modernism would, then, in turn, be the general ‘name’ for a cultural or subjective self-consciousness about, and expression of, this temporal logic of modernity, and of its dialectic of negation and newness: a ‘constant revolutionising’ that incessantly negates all ‘fixed, fast frozen relations’. Artistically, the modernist work is that which, in some way, registers this non-identity of modernity and tradition within itself, engaging the social logic of capitalist modernity at the level of form

All this is broadly well known and understood, and Berman’s terms are ones that have often been taken up in architectural theory over the last decade or so, most recently by Hilde Heynen.²⁶ Yet they need here to be reconnected to that social logic of ‘capitalism itself’ if we are to draw out their full significance; a reconnection which requires a certain ‘return’ to Marx. Let us thus re-read the Marx passage and note one of its other theoretical ‘dimensions’: ‘The need for a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere’. For Marx himself, the temporal condition of modernity described by Osborne is, then, simultaneously the production of (and may be produced out of) new spatial relations. That is to say, modernity’s progressive intensification of a temporal logic also entails a progressive negation of certain historically-specific spatial logics and relations – most obviously, those associated with ‘place’ as traditionally conceived in terms of physical contiguity or belonging. As Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*, in capitalist modernity there is a sense in which ‘even spatial distance reduces itself to time’: ‘While capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e., to exchange, and conquer the whole world for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time’.²⁷ Thus, as the fundamental form of time-consciousness within capitalist society, modernity equally serves to constitute its fundamental form of space-consciousness – the ultimate horizon of a ‘connectivity’ of an ‘everywhere’, of pure equi-valence.

We will not be the first to note that, although Marx himself only implies the term, such a spatial form and consciousness of connectivity takes, among its most famous names, that of the metropolis, which, for Simmel, was space as ‘dominated’ by the money economy. As a system of connectivity, the metropolis is formed, as

Benjamin says in one of his conversations with Brecht, by a ‘boundless maze of indirect relationships, complex mutual dependencies and compartmentations’.²⁸ The space of the metropolis is one made up of newly differentiated and variegated flows of connection, where the individual subject is increasingly dependent upon an ensemble of rationalised and abstract mediations of social relations that resist understanding. Above all, as modern form, the metropolis is a dynamic technical *system* of relations or references – i.e. precisely what Marx calls a system of production - which, in a *historical* sense, defines the very nature of the human itself. In this sense, the metropolis might well be understood conceptually as the spatial correlate, the material support, of the culture (of temporal abstraction) of modernity in general.²⁹ Such a reading would, we think, follow directly from the passage from the *Manifesto*. This is implicit also in Berman, whose book is essentially a compendium of the *urban* experience of Paris, St. Petersburg and New York.

At any rate, in these terms, what we understand by modernism, in architecture, cannot thus be reduced solely to its use of new technologies or materials - glass, steel, reinforced concrete - nor to its particular, diverse stylistic forms and rhetorics, but, above all, must be understood through its ineliminable engagement with, and subjection to, the spatial and temporal forms of the urban. Architecture’s *modern* identity cannot be disentangled from the larger social and spatial formations of what Marx describes as a subjection of ‘the country to the rule of the towns’. What Beatriz Colomina says of Loos, that the ‘subject of [his] architecture is the citizen of the metropolis, immersed in its abstract relations’, is true in far more general terms.³⁰ From nineteenth-century utopianism and functionalism, through Le Corbusier and Mies, to the likes of Koolhaas and Herzog and de Meuron today, it is the historical increase in ‘the urban population as opposed to the rural’, one of the key social logics of capitalist modernity, and the spatial conditions of this historically new metropolitan life, which is the always implicit subject of modern architecture, and in relation to which it must irresistibly articulate itself. Modernism is, in part, the question of what such a life might mean, and of what forms it can and should take.

Let us return to the ‘architectural’ examples in the passage from the *Communist Manifesto* itself in order to begin to unpack what we might understand more specifically by architectural modernity here. What exactly are the ‘wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals’ that capitalist modernity has ‘accomplished’? What is their nature and historical logic?

Capitalism has consistently visualised, symbolised and articulated its most radical ideas and practices through both real and imagined spatial developments and experiences, from the nineteenth-century Great Exhibitions and urban infrastructures to the contemporary resorts of Las Vegas. As well as existing as commodities and spectacles, these and almost all architectural objects are themselves a new part of the production cycle. In a self-evident way a factory building is part of the 'means of production'. Slightly less obvious but just as structural to production are the airport, the high-speed rail system, the shopping centre, and the home itself.

A principle manifestation of modernism in architecture is the communication of new *processes of modernisation*. Most visibly this has been the expression of new construction technologies and materials. There is little need to repeat the canonic histories of steel, glass and concrete architectural expression over the last century, or to remind the reader of the communicative potential of contemporary developments such as computer-aided manufacturing or ecological design. However, processes of modernisation have of course not been restricted to construction, but would certainly include organisational technologies and media technologies as well. Again, very familiar examples of *modernism* constituted through what are conceived of as *processes of modernisation* could be drawn from both its canonic and marginal histories. In addition there are buildings that express cultural or subjectively formed responses to the *experience* of modernity - as well as buildings which might self-consciously articulate, as 'objects', experiences of modernity in themselves. In recent years, Peter Eisenman for example has repeatedly stated that his work confronts an alienated modern subjectivity through the production of equally alienated 'post-humanist' objects - using an argument more convincingly employed by Michael Hayes in his discussion of the historical avant garde.³¹ Libeskind too, in the Jewish Museum at least, has attempted to use the physical experience of alienation induced through the occupation of architectural form as a method for intensifying narrative programme. In a similar though more easily generalizable way, Zaha Hadid has claimed to be involved in an implicitly politicized 'continuation of the unfinished modern project' - and certainly in schemes like the Leipzig BMW plant, it might be argued that the formal abstractions employed by the architect intensify the spatial experience of modern programme. Similar claims can be made about the work of an increasing number of converging practices - UN Studio, Future Systems or Ushida Findlay to name just some of the usual suspects - although, of course, any

contemporary building is, in principle, *generative* of such experience, as indeed are the global-metropolitan spatial structures that we occupy, from railway stations and airports to the World Wide Web. As Marx indicated in 1848, our historical form of space-consciousness does indeed entail, with ever increasing force, a compulsion to ‘establish connections everywhere’ as a very condition of the spatial environment – a compulsion which resonates in, for example, David Greene’s *Locally Available World Unseen Networks*, the ‘negative utopianism’ of Superstudio’s *Continuous Monument*, or much of Koolhaas’s most important work; various visions of an architectural web that might encompass the entire planet. Such ‘examples’ would clearly be near endless. The crucial point here, however, is a more general and structural one. What do we mean by the modernity of ‘modern’ architecture itself? And how does this, in turn, relate to modernity’s complex imbrication with the logics of capitalist development? If, as Osborne says, the ‘distance from traditional cultural forms registered by radical temporal abstraction does indeed associate it with a particular culture’ - the culture of capital - to what extent does this imply that ‘the political content of any particular modernism is in some way compromised by this affinity, in advance’?³² Such, as we shall see, is Tafuri’s quintessentially Marxian question.

Production

For Marx, economic, political and social processes are articulated through dialectical relationships between three elements or moments: material productive forces (or the means/mode of production), actual social relations (or the division of labour, ownership and law) and spiritual consciousness (ideology: something ‘between’ the freedom of total man and alienated false consciousness). In taking up, and exploring the potentialities of this thought, we must reflect upon the objects, images, techniques and ideas through which architecture produces: its means of production. Similarly, we must consider *what* it produces. First, operating according to the demands of development, it produces particular material objects (buildings, environments, spectacle). Second, it produces social practices associated with both the production and consumption or occupation of these specific material objects and technologies. Third, it produces and reproduces itself as a discourse, as knowledge. These relationships undergo constant change. The emergence for example of computer aided

manufacturing technologies (a means of production) are opening up important new ways for architects to get involved in making things (shifts in the division of labour).

Here we need to attend to specific histories charting the divisions of mental and physical labour within the production of spatial culture and the built environment – among these, as Vidler points out, the historical emergence of the profession of architecture itself as ‘autonomous’, as an ‘ideology’ in its own right:

[It is this ideology] which, in the first instance was constructed in order to provide symbols in the form of monuments, to authorise works of public and private display, to provide aesthetic cover for the ramified building activities of capitalist society. [...] it has informed the so-called ‘vandalism’ of the Revolutionary period, the building of Hausmann’s monuments, the experiments of Eiffel and Hennebique, the construction of state capitals from New Delhi to Chandigarh and Brasilia.³³

One could not find a more powerful exemplification of capitalism’s accomplishment of ‘wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals’, its constant ‘revolutionising [of] the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production’. Equally, however, as the likes of Andrew Saint and Graham Ive have insisted, actual spatial-social relations must be understood through specific histories and struggles around, for example, land ownership and property law in relation to which architectural ‘ideology’ comes to be defined. Unfortunately, such work still remains marginalised.

In Lefebvre, who could offer something to such studies, space itself is, of course, conceived as commodity within capitalist modernity, but also as something far more structural to the workings of capital – as the spaces both through which capital flows and which are themselves generated by capital. Drawing, finally, on Tafuri in particular, and in light of Marx’s three ‘elements’ or ‘moments’, it is useful, therefore, to consider briefly what might be described as the three distinct tasks placed upon architectural knowledge in capitalist modernity. The first is to act as technicians of spatial development. Under capitalism, this is primarily the task of commodifying space. This is what the vast majority of architects spend the vast majority of their time involved in. The second task is a ‘poetic’ or artistic one, and is to do with somehow dealing with, expressing, intensifying or ameliorating the spatial experience of

modernity. The third task is a utopian or avant-garde one, and is to do with imagining alternative socio-spatial futures. Although all three are always present in each other to some degree, there have been moments in the struggle over social space and its modes of production where the third task, imagining alternative socio-spatial futures, becomes an urgent part of defining the first task – the work to be done by everyday technicians of spatial development.

Avant-garde and Utopia

The above is necessarily schematic, but such moments of struggle and futural imagining would include, most obviously, the first ten years in Russia following the revolution, where the relative positions of architects, the building industry and political structures were rethought at the same time as proposed and realised projects (from domestic objects to buildings to entire urban regions) which were at least partly embedded in these new social relations (the division of labour, ownership and law). Other particular moments would include the struggles over space in the Social Democratic cities of Germany, as famously analysed by Tafuri, and involving the activist tradition around Bruno Taut, the expressionists and the Artist's Soviet, Ernst May, Martin Wagner, and others. Yet other moments would include the worldwide struggles over space that culminated in 1968, and which define one set of parameters for Lefebvre's work. As well as projects like Constant's (presently much celebrated) New Babylon, one also thinks of the (sometimes partly parodic or ironic) images of alternative socio-spatial futures produced by groups like Superstudio and Archigram: Benjaminian wish-images that necessarily suggest, whether through their endless megastructural audacity, or through the simple abolition of the building commodity, a revision of the ways that social space is owned, controlled and organised; a 'utopian' yearning for an alternate non-capitalist future that might be constructed out of the present.

One of the many important problems raised by Tafuri – somewhat against the grain of Benjamin's argument in this instance - is precisely to do with the viability of these images of alternative socio-spatial futures, which are potentially seen by him as being dangerous ideological veils, if not rooted in already existing changes to social relations. That is, such positions can threaten to result only in self-deception, obscuring real possibilities of transforming reality, and ultimately reinforce the relations they seek to displace. Unable to reflect upon the social conditions of its own

ideological status, and the division of labour sustaining it, the desire to overcome an institutional separation from the social life-world, on the part of art or architecture *themselves*, can only ever result in a false reconciliation under capitalism. Hence, for Tafuri, the unavoidably tragic history of the Benjaminian attempt to dissolve the auratic architectural object; a dissolution which may have been the only possibility of rendering itself 'political', but which - in the face of the production cycle of a metropolis that it could never control - found its 'intrinsic limits' always 'exposed'. Yet we should return the 'architectural problems treated' here, as Tafuri himself demands, to the 'theoretical context' of the 'most advanced studies of Marxist thought' which originally defined them. Understanding of Tafuri's writings within architectural discourse has been blocked by a failure to locate them in this way. Tafuri himself refers to the journal *Contropiano*, in which the essay 'Towards a Critique of Architectural Ideology' first appeared in 1969, and this title's own evident allusion to Marx's *Critique of Political Economy*.³⁴ Read in this context it is clear that Tafuri's notorious arguments actually constitute the architectural elaboration of what can be construed as a fairly *classical* Marxian critique of a reformist, social democratic attempt to work within existing socio-political institutions. At the same time, the twentieth-century avant-garde appears, for Tafuri, as something like a specifically urban repetition of romanticism's founding naiveté - its utopian linkage of aesthetic absolutism to the work of politics - which itself repeats Marx's own strictures against nineteenth-century utopian socialism (of the type propounded by Fourier). Marx's critique of utopianism, like Tafuri's, always rested upon its failure to yoke subjective transformative will to the *real* movement of social developments.

Yet this is not the whole story. The problem with Berman's justly renowned reading of the *Communist Manifesto* is, for example, to be located in its ultimate reduction of modernity and modernism, against its own political intentions, to an essentially celebratory dynamic identified completely with the productive logic of capitalism itself; and there can be little doubt that Tafuri risks such a reduction also. Marx appears then as the great 'poet' of capitalist modernity, expressing and articulating its defining experience; a conception which enticingly prefigures his current reception as prophet of globalisation. Not that this is unimportant, but restricted to a kind of energetics of present upheaval - above all, the intoxicating maelstrom of metropolitan life - as it is in Berman in particular, it elides that other temporal dynamic so key to Marx's 'modernism': its futural impulse towards a non-

capitalist alternative. As such, before rushing to reiterate the usual obituary notices for the avant-garde's 'stratagems', whether broadly 'artistic' or 'political' - that failure of transformative intent which, given its effective irresistibility, has never really been a *failure* at all (for what is a failure when, on its own terms, it could never have achieved success) - it would be more fruitful to reflect upon what is revealed by such ambitions themselves, what they may tell us about the character of the 'screen' on which they are projected.³⁵ This would be, more modestly, to seek to comprehend something of our contemporary situation through a reflection upon its historical character, upon both its ideological resistances and prefigurations. At stake here would be, at the very least, the possibility of architectural form and knowledge as an ongoing medium for the expression of social contradiction; an expression which, nonetheless, takes place within, as Osborne says, 'the horizon of their sublation', of a possible post-capitalist future, even if such a future can apparently no longer be *positively* projected by the work.³⁶

Adorno makes, in his one essay devoted to architecture, what is itself an exemplary Marxist point:

[Architectural work] is conditioned by a social antagonism over which the greatest architecture has no power: the same society which developed human productive energies to unimaginable proportions has chained them to conditions of production imposed upon them. [...] This fundamental contradiction is most clearly visible in architecture.³⁷

It is this *visibility* – its formal and phenomenological registering of the disjunction between the (technological and social) possibilities and actuality of modernity - that gives architecture something of what Jameson calls its 'emblematic significance' (as in, for example, post-conceptual art, as well as in contemporary cultural theory): 'its immediacy to the social', the 'seam it shares with the economic'.³⁸ For Tafuri, we should remember, architecture is always, even at its most silent, the site of communicative spatial practices (perhaps especially at its most silent).³⁹

This relates, most obviously and immediately, today to architecture's articulation of the internal and external historically-variable relations that it has to other cultural forms within the antagonistic reality of the capitalist metropolis to whose productive logics it is subjected - mass media, communication technologies,

advertising, commodity design, signage, retail display, and so on - so as to critically mediate and express existing forms of social conflict and laceration within itself. At the same time, however, such articulation takes place, globally, in the context of what is a geographically and culturally 'uneven' process of capitalist development, as Marxist geographers like David Harvey remind us. In this light, one of the weaknesses of both Tafuri's and Berman's somewhat over-totalizing accounts of modernism becomes apparent. For what Tafuri describes as a 'prefiguration of an abstract final moment of development coincident with a global rationalization' is, as a developmental process, by no means as monolithic or as absolute (even in its abstraction) as he appears to have supposed.⁴⁰

It is this that should, finally, cause us to complicate the account of modernity with which we started out. For, as Harvey points out, the description of modernity in the *Communist Manifesto* itself is not free of such problems, in its tendency to presume that 'capitalist industry and commodification' will lead to simple 'homogenization'. In fact, our global capitalist modernity presents itself only as a *differentiated* unity, in which such differences are themselves part of what capital accumulation and 'market structures' produces (not merely residues of some pre-capitalist social form). In Harvey's tentative words: 'There is a potentially dangerous estimation within the *Manifesto* of the powers of capital...to mobilize geopolitically, within the overall homogenization achieved through wage labour and market exchange'.⁴¹ This 'mobilization' and 'differentiation', in its *dialectic* with 'homogenization', clearly has considerable implications for the potentialities of contemporary architectural practice and knowledge; one which a moralistic and conservative phenomenology, centred around simplistic conceptions of 'place', is evidently unable to grasp.

The reverberations of Marx's account of capitalist modernity are extraordinary, and find their way into architectural discourse at many varied points. Here, for example, is Rem Koolhaas describing our present moment: a 'moment when the electronics revolution seems about to melt all that is solid - to eliminate all necessity for concentration and physical embodiment'.⁴² Whatever one thinks of his (always provisional) 'solutions' to this 'elimination', perhaps no contemporary architect has seemed so engaged with the questions for architecture raised by what Marx foresaw as capitalist modernity's key spatial consequences - the 'annihilation of space [or, rather, *place*] by time', the horizon of a 'connectivity' of an 'everywhere'.

All 'programmes' thus 'become abstract', Koolhaas writes, 'inasmuch as now they are no longer tied to a specific place or city, but fluctuate and gravitate opportunistically around the point offering the highest number of connections'.⁴³ What does this mean for architectural production? Murray Fraser has suggested that 'the tactics for Koolhaas in recent projects are those of spatial transgression within *different* cultural contexts, as in the public right of way that is to snake through the CCTV headquarters in Beijing, or embedded spatial redundancy, as in the wastage of retail volume in the Prada store at Rodeo Drive, Los Angeles'.⁴⁴ Similarly, Hilde Heynen in her reading of the Zeebrugge Sea Terminal project understands Koolhaas as producing 'a unique locus so that this particular intersection within the network is different from any other, giving character to the nondescript, incoherent area that Zeebrugge is at present'.⁴⁵ Yet such *difference* must now be understood as part of that differentiated *unity* of global capitalist modernity itself, in which, as we have said, such differences are themselves part of what capital accumulation and 'market structures' produces. These are not residues of some pre-capitalist social form, or reactive enclaves bulwarked against the encroachment of modernity, but themselves part of a *new spatial logic* (of connectivity and abstraction that *exceeds* the logic of place) which it is Koolhaas' great merit to have faced. It is not clear that an essentially aesthetic terminology of 'character', which precisely still seems linked to a spatial logic of place, will really be able to grasp this.

The questions raised by all this are huge, and beyond the scope of this essay, but, as a prolegomenon to their further interrogation, it is in such a context that we find ourselves 'returning' to Marx. If 'capitalism itself' is, as we said at the outset, now more invasive than ever, a sober confrontation with its contemporary global reality is more urgent than ever. It is as part of such a confrontation that architecture might provide a critical knowledge, with genuine trans-disciplinary significance, which could, at the very least, tell us something of its social and spatial forms.

Notes

¹ See, for example, the symposium on Christopher J. Arthur's crucial book, *The New Dialectic and Marx's 'Capital'*, in the journal *Historical Materialism* vol. 13, no. 2 (2005), pp. 27-221.

² See David Murray and Mark Neocleous, 'Marx Comes First Again, and Loses', *Radical Philosophy* 134 (November/December 2005), p. 60.

³ Daniel Bensaid, *Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London & New York: Verso, 2002), p. ix.

⁴ See Peter Osborne, *How To Read Marx* (London: Granta, 2005), pp. 1-3.

⁵ Bensaid, *Marx for Our Times*, p. xi.

⁶ The participants in the colloquium were: Iain Borden, David Cunningham, Gail Day, Murray Fraser, Jon Goodbun, Peter Osborne, Jane Rendell, Jeremy Till, and Anthony Vidler. Significant contributions were also made from the floor by Adrian Forty, Michael Edwards, Nic Clear, and David Pinder, among others. We would like to thank here Richard Difford, Ken Paterson, and Alex Warwick for their assistance and support in organising the event, as well as all those who attended.

⁷ Kate Nesbit, Introduction to Manfredo Tafuri, 'Problems in the Form of a Conclusion' in Kate Nesbit (ed.), *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p. 361.

⁸ See David Cunningham, 'The Concept of the Metropolis: Philosophy and Urban Form', *Radical Philosophy* 133 (September/October 2005), p. 13.

⁹ See, for some specific thoughts on this, Jon Goodbun and David Cunningham, 'On Surrealism and Architecture' in Samantha Hardingham (ed.), *The 1970s is Here and Now, Architectural Design*, vol. 75, no. 2 (March/April 2005), pp. 66-69.

¹⁰ Peter Osborne's contribution to the colloquium, 'Art as Displaced Urbanism: Notes on a New Constructivism of the Exhibition-Form', appears in ... *With All Due Intent*, the catalogue for *Manifesta 5*, European Biennial of Contemporary Art, Donostia-San Sebastian, 2004. See also, on this 'architectural turn', Peter Osborne, 'Non-Places and the Spaces of Art', *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 183-194.

¹¹ This was the central issue that defined an issue of *The Journal of Architecture* (vol. 6, no. 2, Summer 2001) which we co-edited with Karin Jaschke under the title 'Returns of the Avant-Garde: Post-War Movements'. For a gratifying response to some of the questions raised by this issue, see Esra Akcan, 'Manfredo Tafuri's Theory of the Architectural Avant-Garde', *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Summer 2002), pp. 135-170.

¹² We leave aside the question of whether or not the conception of alienation that the early Marx inherits from Hegel is any longer adequate to a theorisation of what is at stake here.

¹³ See Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, pp. 19-49, 6, 8.

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- ¹⁴ For a discussion of the Marx's EPM within the context of 19C German orientalism and spatial aesthetics, see Jon Goodbun, *Marx Matters*, in Katie Lloyd Thomas (ed.), *Material Matters* (London: Routledge, 2006)
- ¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (London & New York: W.W. Norton), p.89
- ¹⁶ Ibid. p. 87
- ¹⁷ Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1995), p. 25.
- ¹⁸ See Osborne, *How to Read Marx*, pp. 37-9, 53.
- ¹⁹ See Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time I: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). See also, on the relation of such technics to the city, Bernard Stiegler, 'Technics of Decision', *Angelaki* vol. 8, no. 2 (August 2003), pp. 154-5.
- ²⁰ One should be careful here, nonetheless, for what Marx means by commodity fetishism, in *Capital*, should not be confused with a 'commodity aesthetics' in the sense explored by someone like Wolfgang Haug – what might be better described as *consumer* fetishism. See Osborne, *How to Read Marx*, pp. 11-14. Rather, commodity fetishism concerns the *social being* of the commodity itself, in general, in its 'possession' of exchange-value. This is *essentially* abstract and, in itself, has, as Marx makes very clear, nothing to do with the particular sensual, material aspects of specific commodities, though it is no less 'real' for that.
- ²¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 233.
- ²² Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976), p. ix.
- ²³ Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 89.
- ²⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 222-3, 224. See Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1983), p. 21.
- ²⁵ Osborne, 'Non-Places and the Spaces of Art', p. 183. See also Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 63-77.
- ²⁶ See Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 1.
- ²⁷ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicholas (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 358, 359.
- ²⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'Conversations with Brecht', trans. Stanley Mitchell, in *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1973), p. 111.
- ²⁹ See David Cunningham, 'The Phenomenology of Non-Dwelling', *Crossings* 7 (Fall 2004).
- ³⁰ Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
- ³¹ See Michael Hayes, *Modernism and the Post-Humanist subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
- ³² Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, p. 60.

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- ³³ Anthony Vidler, 'Disenchanted History/Negative Theories: Tafuri's Dream Book', unpublished paper from Westminster 'Marx, Architecture and Modernity' colloquium, p. 1.
- ³⁴ Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, p. viii-ix. See also Gail Day, 'Strategies in the Metropolitan Merz', *Radical Philosophy* 133 (September/October 2005), pp. 26-38. This latter article draws upon Day's paper delivered at the Westminster 'Marx, Architecture and Modernity' colloquium.
- ³⁵ Rem Koolhaas: 'The city [is] always the screen on which the avant-garde projects its ambitions, against which the avant-garde prepares its (usually futile) stratagems of substitutions'. 'Eno/abling Architecture' in R. E. Somol (ed.), *Autonomy and Ideology: Positioning an Avant-Garde in America* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997), p. 294.
- ³⁶ Osborne, 'Remember the Future?', p. 74, 75.
- ³⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Functionalism Today', in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 16. For a more detailed reading of this essay, see David Cunningham, 'Architecture as Critical Knowledge', in Mark Dorrian, Murray Fraser, Jonathan Hill and Jane Rendell (eds), *Critical Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), forthcoming.
- ³⁸ Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London & New York: Verso, 1998), p. 163.
- ³⁹ See Jon Goodbun, 'Brand New Tafuri', *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Summer 2001).
- ⁴⁰ Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, p. 62.
- ⁴¹ David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), pp.383-4.
- ⁴² Rem Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen Verlag, 1997), p. 606.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 234.
- ⁴⁴ Murray Fraser, 'The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture', *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2005), p. 320 (emphasis added).
- ⁴⁵ Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*, p. 215.