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978-0-521-58645-0 - *Ontology of Construction: On Nihilism of Technology in Theories of Modern Architecture*

Gevork Hartoonian

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Ontology of Construction explores theories of construction in modern architecture, with particular focus on the relationship between nihilism of technology and architecture. Providing a historical context for the concept of “making,” the essays collected in this volume articulate the implications of technology in works by such architects as Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos, and Mies van der Rohe. They also offer an interpretation of Gottfried Semper’s discourse on the tectonic and the relationship between architecture and other crafts. Emphasizing “fabrication” as a critical theme for contemporary architectural theory and practice, *Ontology of Construction* is a provocative contribution to the current debate in these areas.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by
Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521586450

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First published 1994

First paperback edition 1997

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-58645-0 Paperback

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To My Mother

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FOREWORD

As the title of this collection implies, the primary theme that these essays address is the searching and difficult question of how the reality of the man-made environment can be structured, both ethically and rationally, in a highly operational and secularized technoscientific age. As the author is prompt to point out, this question is neither new nor singular and has in fact been continuously rising in the modern consciousness since the end of the eighteenth century. As he shows, following the lead of the Frankfurt school, this aporia has been brought about by the triumph of global technology and its penetration of every aspect of the life-world. While the English Pre-Raphaelite and Arts and Crafts intellectuals of the mid-nineteenth century – among them, A. W. N. Pugin, John Ruskin, and William Morris – were the first to react against the erosion of both tradition and faith under the impact of the Industrial Revolution, the deeper cultural consequences of this technological transformation were not adequately articulated until the exceptionally perceptive writings of the German architect and cultural theorist Gottfried Semper – above all, his *Science, Industry and Art* and his *Four Elements of Architecture*, both published in 1852. While the former first posed, without a trace of sentiment, the still extant question concerning the evident devaluation of traditional craft-based culture through the advent of industrial reproduction and mass consumption, with all the simulations and substitutions that this inevitably entails – as Semper put it, “How will time or science bring law and order into this thoroughly confused state of affairs?” – the latter, with its focus upon a Caribbean hut exhibited in the Great Exhibition of 1851, assumed for the first time what one may call the ethnographic Archimedean point that was returned to repeatedly by critical intellectuals throughout the succeeding century.

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This anthropological interest in remote preindustrial civilizations and even in pre-agricultural nomadic cultures will serve spontaneously as a compensatory reference for some future self-realization of the species located outside the nightmare of history, beyond that which Walter Benjamin once characterized as the “storm of progress.”

This interest in the archaic, remote from the bourgeois world, has taken on distinctly different guises in different hands. Despite these variations, however, a discernible thread runs through the thought of a number of figures as the twentieth century unfolds, ranging from architects as diverse as Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe to generic intellectuals as diffuse in their ideological affinities as Benjamin, Georg Simmel, Theodor Adorno, and Martin Heidegger, as well as the much less renowned Jesuit philosopher Romano Guardini, who exercised such a decisive influence on the work and thought of Mies. The scope of this critical intelligentsia widened after the Second World War to include existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and later the French poststructuralist philosophers Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard and, last but not least, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, whose advocacy of “weak thought” seems to be the aspirational light, so to speak, at the end of Hartoonian’s tunnel. While the author discusses all of these figures, along with many others too numerous to mention here, the architects Gottfried Semper and Adolf Loos come to the fore as the two figures that carry, as it were, the main burden of his argument – the former for his general theory of tectonic culture and the latter for the Kraussian skepticism that he brings to the entire enterprise.

Semper is undeniably important for his fundamental break with the classical Vitruvian triad, *utilitas*, *firmitas*, and *venustas*, and for his formulation of an aformal, sociocultural theory – his *Four Elements of Architecture* comprising the archaic components of *earthwork*, *hearth*, *roofwork*, and *screen wall*. The woven, non-load-bearing character of this last led Semper back through multiple examples of nomadic culture to the primacy of textile production and to the cladding of both men and built-form (*Bekleidung*) and, finally, to the fundamental nexus of the knot as the primordial joint upon which the cosmological tectonic art of construction must be ultimately based. For Semper, the structural symbolic essence of tectonics was necessarily closer to the cosmological ritualistic arts of music and dance than to the figurative arts of painting and sculpture, and this distinction would no doubt

inspire Loos's subsequent discrimination between the building tasks of the life-world and the commemorative role of architecture in its monumental aspect – the tomb and the monument.

For Loos, the technological secularization of culture entailed, among other things, a repudiation of the Christian Gothic tradition, and this had the effect of distancing him from the European structuralist protomodern line in all its guises from Eugène Viollet-le-Duc to Antonio Gaudi. Although he would adopt the American Arts and Crafts, Queen Anne manner in many of his domestic interiors, as the liberal-progressive Anglo-American mode, he nonetheless looked back to Schinkel and neoclassic form for architecture at its most honorific. Distanced to an equal degree from both historicism and avant-gardism and preoccupied as Semper had been by the need to transform traditional paradigms in light of the new productive means, Loos attempted the acrobatic feat of sustaining tradition while simultaneously embracing the inevitable and seemingly liberating thrust of technology. This dichotomous attitude is evident from one of his ironic aphorisms, in which he wrote, "There is no point in inventing anything unless it is an improvement," a sentiment that is surely equally applicable to both tradition and technology.

Loos's delicate parody of the Richardsonian domestic manner, replete with false Tudor beams and wainscoting, would, as Hartoonian remarks, citing Vattimo, preserve tradition by undermining its content, with the result that these *Gemutlich* interiors are both reassuring and subtly subversive. They speak of Georg Simmel's alienating metropolis in the context of which they were merely to function as some kind of reassuring *mise-en-scène*. Their value-free outer walls find an appropriately silent expression in Loos's blank, monochromatic facades pierced by square windows and stripped of all ornament. Influenced by Semper's *Bekleidung* thesis, Loos attempted to impose an ethical nihilism on the already schizophrenic, mechanized metropolis wherein things would be dressed or undressed according to the required pathos of their action setting. Thus, the house would be clad within but unclad without, where everything had already been reduced to the abstractions of capitalist speculation, to which Loos responded with the cryptic declaration that revealed the critical Kraussian stance underlying his work. His famous slogan "The house is conservative and the work of art is revolutionary" already hints at the fact that his

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work has to be seen as a mixture of both. In the main, the only exception to his nihilistic blank syntax was either the false vernacular, which he reserved for his vacation houses, set in open countryside, or the classical monumentality of the occasional public institution.

Hartoonian remarks with exceptional clairvoyance that Frank Lloyd Wright, subject to different circumstances, met the needs of an alienated, migrant, middle class with a totally different strategy:

From 1893 to 1910, Wright set down a metaphoric language known as Prairie architecture. What distinguishes this period from the rest of Wright's career is the attempt he makes to restate tradition by new means and materials. Unlike architects from the Arts and Crafts movement, he never yearned for the cottage. . . . In contrast to classical architecture, in Wright's plan, the cross axis neither sustains frontality nor initiates a symmetrical order. In the Ward Willets house, Wright summons the basic sensation of place, as if a nomad were experiencing it. In this context, the cross axis is the abstract representation of the natural existence of the earth, a device for orientation, settlement, and departure. . . . In almost every plan, the center is given over to the hearth, the fireplace, where the comfort attained through its warmth stimulates a temporary feeling of settlement.

Looking back across the history of modernity, Hartoonian conceives of montage as the quintessentially late modern cultural strategy, one that is as disjunctive in film as it is conjunctive in architecture and also, paradoxically, vice versa. He sees the act of montage as the one mediatory agent whereby tradition may be reinterpreted and hence *recollected* in face of the operational inroads and transformations wrought by technology. In the process of evolving that which Hartoonian identifies as the "ontology of the present," montage proceeds as much by concealing as by revealing, as in the work of Mies van der Rohe, say, or even more perhaps in the dialectic of junction and disjunction in the work of the Italian architect Carlo Scarpa.

Scarpa's work brings to light all the ambiguity that lies within the word "fabrication," which signifies not only the act of making but also the more negative connotation indicating the creation of an artifice bordering on falsehood. It is an architecture of revetment par excellence, in which what is revealed reciprocally presupposes a certain masking by definition. This in itself is hardly new, but what is unique in Scarpa's production is the way in which this expressive play between exotic revetment, on the one hand, and the naked

materiality, on the other, is often combined with an excessively rhetorical elaboration of the joint or seam between them. Scarpa thereby engenders a complex discourse in his work in which structure and ornament are part and parcel of the same movement. According to Hartoonian, both of these attributes are etymologically inscribed in the Greek word *kosmos*, signifying both universe and decoration, a synthesis that is echoed today in such common words as “cosmos” and “cosmetic.” As Hartoonian puts it (and here, he seems to be alluding to Scarpa):

Traditionally, the symbolic function of architecture was an attribute of its monumentality, signifying by its classical language a definitive universality. . . . And yet “emptied” of its representational connotations, a monument is an ornament par excellence, the significance of which rests not in the fixation of a set of values, but in pointing to the occurrence of an event that forms a background for our collective experience (Semper’s artifice?) generating a multiplicity of interpretation.

Value, event, background, and collective experience are terms that suggest the necessary consummation of architecture through social ritual and life experience – in other words, a programmatic articulation of built-form bordering on the theatrical, that is, an open-ended expressivity to which Scarpa seems to have been particularly dedicated. Thus, the “construction of the not yet construed” would appear to presuppose a creativity that is grounded in a perpetual state of postponement, a kind of deliberately unfinished technostatic event that Ernst Bloch would elsewhere characterize more generally as a *projected hope*. This is where Hartoonian leaves us in his rereading of the evolution of architectural modernity in terms of both theory and practice. It is a precise, informed, but open-ended rereading that demands in itself to be constantly reread and reinterpreted. In this sense it is by definition an unfinished work, a didactic “not yet” that prompts further reflection on what could one day still prove to be a new form of ethical practice.

KENNETH FRAMPTON

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I am writing these lines at a moment of my existence when the delight of publishing my first book and an ongoing struggle for identity and recognition have come together to impress upon me one more time that I am nothing but a being thrown into the world. Among friends who have borne my anxieties, I especially thank Kenneth Frampton, from whom I have learned to think of the poetics of construction, though I realize more than ever how far I remain from what he can do and has done for the craft of architecture. I am also thankful for his friendship and those moments of intellectual exchange that have profited me enormously. I am grateful to Harry Francis Mallgrave for concrete and constructive comments. I am also thankful for David Leatherbarrow's critical comments and advice. The title of the final chapter, "Construction of the Not Yet Construed," speaks for my debt to Marco Frascari's discourse, and I express my thanks for his counsel and encouragement throughout my academic work. I am indebted to Peggy Irish for her careful editing of an early draft. My thanks go to Beatrice Rehl at Cambridge University Press, whose effort in publishing this book was enormous. Finally, I am conscious of how much I have profited from the intellectual exchange with my friends and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania.

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