

Each generation writes its biography in the buildings it creates.

– Louis Mumford

### Untitled Theories of Building Objects

In May 1966, Charles Moore, then chairman of the department of architecture at Yale University, renovated his home in New Haven, Connecticut, contributing in part to the creation of a new style of building. In a way not altogether different from Frank Gehry's 1978 home in Santa Monica, California, which would foretell the formal practices embedded in deconstructivism, Moore's New Haven structure posed an image of postmodernism yet to be clearly articulated and defined.<sup>1</sup> Building upon ideas already present in Robert Venturi's mother's house of 1964, Moore's design staged a scintillating array of forms and figures that challenged normative perceptions of domestic life. A theatrical cornucopia of object making, it operated as an experimental "laboratory," provoking its users to "stop and think" about novel building forms and organizational strategies for "opening up" space both horizontally and vertically. As "a constantly changing," "never-to-be-finished workshop for himself and his students," Moore's house proved, according to one critic at the time, "a crucible where ideas . . . [were] born, [and] theories tested."<sup>2</sup> The project turned out to be an exemplary building in and of its time, advancing disciplinary knowledge while exceeding the practice to resonate with culture in and throughout history. Part of a revolution in human society—the postmodern turn—Moore's designs, like Venturi's and others', marked a paradigmatic moment where buildings supported the invention of a new kind of architectural theory that aimed to question modern apperceptions.<sup>3</sup>

Works of architecture by Venturi, Moore, and Gehry, to name a few, have historically served as incubators of experimental ideas and knowledge. Their buildings anticipated an ongoing effort by recent generations to imagine visual and spatial practices that could overturn assumptions about how our physical environment impacts everyday human activities and affects. In this essay, I will begin by briefly discussing a series of texts from *The Building* that reveal, through the power of discourse, some of the ways in which contemporary architecture can engage with larger societal concerns around human perceptions and actions. I will do so by focusing on the buildings' experiential content and its capacity to form open social contexts that come to bear on human behavior.

Stan Allen's contribution stands out in this respect. It provocatively mobilizes architectural thinking to unveil how flexible organizational strategies in a building's design can suspend and dissolve apparent social oppositions. Recognizing that "ideas . . . are latent in the

matter of building itself” and “are not a simple superstructure over and around building,” Allen uses the details of Mansilla and Tuñón’s Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (MUSAC) to argue clearly and decisively for specific values and logics that he believes in strongly. Foremost among these is the social importance of open and/or indeterminate spaces/places.<sup>4</sup>

MUSAC features an abstract organizing geometry that creates a system with sufficient flexibility to accommodate varied functions. It supplies a flexible array of processional spaces that can be separated and partitioned, or joined together. As the plan geometry is potentially infinite, it exceeds the context of its site. Moreover, argues Allen, the entry provides a public space for making the building accessible and symbolically permeable to the city. It is a building that is “simultaneously open and closed,” which Allen maintains is “appropriate to contemporary life and thoughts.” Through his analysis, he supports MUSAC’s constructed environment of spatial partitioning as one that encourages freedom of engagement and interaction: it is a place that offers both expansive and localized spaces for diverse uses and user groups.

Sophia Psarra’s essay also deals with open spatial conditions achieved through well-articulated formal and organizational strategies. However, while Allen looks at MUSAC’s flexible construction of movable partitions, Psarra turns to techniques of transparency, reflection, sensuality, and materiality as used to construct a spatial language of “weakly framed” social engagement. Psarra sees SANAA’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museum, with its “architecture of lightness,” as the perfect example of a building that communicates through qualitative spatial forms. Her analysis examines the social and cultural value of an architecture like SANAA’s that appears to break down boundaries by “weakening the influence of institutional control.” In doing so, it forms what she describes as a “relaxed” space—one not unlike that heralded in the subversive spatial practices of other modern, postmodern, and contemporary architects (including Mies van der Rohe, Moore, Morphosis, and UN Studio, among others).

Psarra’s analysis of open, dispersive environments is perhaps more resolute in Rafi Segal’s text on his design for the National Library of Israel, in Jerusalem. Here Segal—an architect, historian, critic, and theorist—knowingly devises an architectural language with the very intent to “contravene the city’s ‘politics of segregation.’” He does so through a number of flexible topological elements that result in “a public building of seamless movement and interaction.” The tectonic devices he uses—a network of flat slab floors with stepped roof structures, mushroom columns, and skylights—create a series of performative and experiential effects that he carefully describes in his writing. In both Segal’s and Psarra’s readings of their respective buildings, they produce discourse by locating an architectural space/place that hopes to avoid dividing human engagement through boundaries and partitions. Instead, it is one that seeks

to trigger opportunities for localized and generalized interactions alike, thereby liberating human behavior from invariable conditions of societal control.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that a building can affect human action and perception continues to be one of the more significant challenges our discipline faces today. Panopticism, as defined by Michel Foucault, provided an organizational diagram of a type of spatial character that influenced unconscious human inclinations. But there are many other ways in which architecture can alter our autonomic habits that remain to be examined and understood. Penelope Dean's essay on the "Empire of Platforms" argues most specifically toward this point. Not entirely differently from the authors cited above, she articulates her interest in an architecture that advances an open space for diversification of unforeseen use. The platform-space of *House NA*, with its elimination of vertical dividers and details, proposes an organizing principle whereby the user "adjusts," "chooses," and "designates" "new ways of performing" in correlation with a kaleidoscopic space of objects. This form of space is set in opposition to those of mass and envelope, thus providing a seemingly illegible environment—a neutral platform on which daily life can play out. Valorizing indeterminate spaces, her reading of *House NA* supports the social, political, and cultural value of a particular way of being.

Allen, Psarra, Segal, and Dean, all arguing for a similar set of social conditions, prove that there is not one but many ways that buildings can stage freer environments. They begin to identify how architecture of varied practices can have powerful effects on a user's lifestyle and/or behavior while sharing a common desire to promote free will and/or unguided interaction. Many contemporary thinkers, I believe, would concur that such ideals remain highly valued in today's society.

Addressing these post-Foucauldian practices in architecture, González de Canales astutely questions the liberatory agendas that negate and/or diffuse/disperse part-to-whole relationships in architecture in order to move away from centralizing organizational figures and toward those favoring multiplicity and inclusivity. Yet his active decision not to ask the meta-questions as to why or even *if* that is really possible via the architectural conditions he and others describe in *The Building* is a provocation. De Canales chooses not to engage the complex social, political, cultural, and economic paradigms surrounding the rhetoric of multiplicity and inclusivity that underpins much of the architectural thinking of the late 20<sup>th</sup> to early 21<sup>st</sup> century—a legacy of postmodern theory. Though it may be specious to assert that *architecture* and/or *buildings* can delimit, incite, or facilitate personal interactions through their forms, materials, and/or organizational strategies, I would insist that reconsidering the operational strategies of buildings and their impact on human behavior remains extremely important.

One dichotomy that perhaps deserves further attention is the one that Tschumi hints at, in his quintessential diatribe in this book, between *buildings* and *architecture*. In simple terms, we can describe the former as structures that often aim only to be financially rewarding to developers, and the latter as those that attempt to embody something beyond that. Many will see this distinction as an outmoded theory. As much history/theory of the recent past has shown, everyday buildings may be as interesting as architecture (if not more in some respects) when it comes to identifying and studying the anthropological dimensions of human culture, history, nature, and being. In that regard, Etien Santiago's essay in *The Building* provides a fitting example. Santiago studies large suburban housing plans that have developed complex organizational strategies (open and redundant networking patterns). These can be viewed as expressions of contemporary technology (the internet) and/or evolving societal norms that in turn affect human behavior when materialized. Yet while everyday buildings are extremely relevant to architectural discourse and its study, differentiating them from architecture as the outcome of intensive design and a refined intellectual effort continues to be a productive necessity.

Architecture as a discipline specializes in the design, construction, and study of notable and significant buildings—that is, those buildings that are paradigmatic of a culturally sophisticated or materially advanced approach to design. Architectural buildings are “exemplary,” to use Giorgio Agamben's term in his *Coming Community*.<sup>6</sup> Architecture is a subset of building that exists as a threshold condition between an art of communication and a practice of production. Buildings that have something meaningful to add to the cultural and/or technological discourse of our time—they are architectural. Still, regardless of whether or not a building is constructed (I am referring here to Enrique Walker's text in *The Building*, which challenges the valorization of a built work over an unbuilt design project)—whether it is built or designed today, twenty-five or a hundred years ago—architecture proves to be a discursive practice that creates and studies buildings.

Buildings have their own language, however, which precedes any translation into words and is inherently experiential. “Building and plastic creation,” Martin Heidegger remarked, “always happen already, and happen only, in the Open of saying and naming . . . which has already happened unnoticed in language.”<sup>7</sup> Buildings are already constructed with a visual, formal, and material language that communicates: they have a pre-linguistic voice. A building's language is then available to multiple readings and interpretations through architectural discourse.

At the same time, it is important to note that psychoanalysis, the social sciences, and critical theory have all placed the validity of human language and perception in check and in doubt. Our relationship with the built environment is always subject to our limited perceptions, which in turn challenge—if not unconsciously train—our human behavior.<sup>8</sup>

No building, sculpture, or work of art exists outside context, site, author, and program. These impact the reading of a work—though sometimes we try to argue that they don't, which is an interesting effort worth discussing. In recent contemporary debates we have consistently objectified the architectural body, its figures and forms. Many contemporary architects and critics favor the notion of buildings as objects, as if content can be codified and dissected, analyzed at will, for further study and investigation devoid of context. We cannot, however, entirely avoid engaging with context. This is not to suggest that a building should be looked at—or designed, for that matter—contextually with a rudimentary understanding of its fitting into its place in the environment. Nor does it mean that an architectural object doesn't have a powerful voice on its own. It is instead simply to realize that buildings are cultural objects—artifacts—derived by people who exist in time, space, and place, and who belong to a society that has structured their formal and figurative presence—their being in the world, more generally. Even the autonomous building methodologies proposed by Peter Eisenman in his House I-X series have prescriptive characteristics of authorship typical of the postmodern period, which cannot be discounted. Buildings remain open to interpretation and are re-characterized, as Walter Benjamin might argue, from that very rereading of their history at particular points in time.<sup>9</sup> As Sylvia Lavin argues in her essay “Positive Objects,” the exclusive/inclusive practices of analyzing objects we *choose* to see and discuss are what give a work its unique and *subjective* character or voice.<sup>10</sup> All in all, objects are largely bound by authorial and contextual interrelationships that have to be accounted for.

The recent fetishization of objects in contemporary art and architecture is not entirely different from what Foucault and Benjamin argued happened to the modern human subject. The architectural body identified as an object—as if outside site, authorial intent, and program—becomes defamiliarized and, as such, a disempowered form. Rendered discipline-specific, it is seemingly devoid of cultural, social, and political meaning, and thereby left open to critique outside of its valued presence and contextual meaning in the world. When they are not subject to the moral and (often, admittedly) conservative rhetoric of place-making ethics, building objects lend themselves more fittingly to abstract-formal investigations, and no longer require expansive multidisciplinary knowledge and understanding to be known and experienced.

Yet while traditional cultural and contextual readings of buildings still absolutely have

merit, we must also recognize that objectification is in itself an alternate and paramount technique of study. Object-oriented analysis arguably supports the research of an equally significant, if distinct, kind of context: one surrounding detail, material, structure, and form—i.e., those inner-disciplinary building subjects specific to the acts of making, representing, and displaying that often occur in art too. For example, having a building stand on a plinth (not so differently than placing a sculpture on a podium) can call a particular kind of attention to the work as an object “worthy” of inner-disciplinary investigation. As Enrique Walker explores in his contribution to *The Building*, “Urban Villa,” constructing a building on—or even *as*—a plinth actually intensifies the conflict between found object, content, and context. It does not avoid cultural paradigms, but profoundly shifts the focus.

Another move that sets up a valuable opposition between content and context is to title a work of art or architecture “Untitled.” This is a name that still draws consideration to a specific subject, as Heidegger perhaps best described in his study on language’s role in the naming of things.<sup>11</sup> The act of objectification that results from entitling a work “Untitled” is a meaningful one, in that it further challenges us to study the meta-value and meta-intentions of the contemporary debates motivating the very practices of objectification.

“Untitled” is also a label that immediately refers us to the modern and postmodern history of the act of entitling works of art “Untitled”—specifically that around high-art museum culture as formed in contradistinction to the common practice of providing art with titles (since the rise of 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century art markets).<sup>12</sup> Entitling a work of art induces a quick and often precise, marketable reading of the work while at the same time, as Heidegger explains, having the negative effect of delimiting that reading. “Saying and naming” enact a work’s reading while shutting it off from multiple readings by delimiting free will of expression. The modern movement’s use of the “Untitled,” as seen often in painting and sculpture since at least the 1950s, challenged the work of art’s discursive strategies. Positioning works as objects without authorial or curatorial prescription forces viewers to engage with them more directly, i.e. with fewer prescriptions of specific meanings. In the art world, such tactics are now commonplace and carry pretentious connotations. But in architecture, where labeling buildings has only recently become fashionable, entitling a text about buildings “Untitled” might have insightful ramifications.

An untitled text would immediately mark the act of objectification; it would be as if the architecture within the text was to be read as a building object itself, without a label identifying the text’s very subjective character and overall intended meaning. An untitled text would remain an open work: open to discernment, open to free engagement, open to discourse and debate.<sup>13</sup> Uncharacterized by any one specific reading—any one specific use—an untitled text, similarly to

the often untitled building it describes, would not be one of a mere thing, or mere equipment tasked with a specific program or use. Instead, an untitled text, like an untitled building, would encourage, if not require, a closer, more precise reading of its contents—thereby rendering it amenable to multiple interpretations by multiple audiences as to the subject *of its context*.

In a sense, as with Abstract Expressionist painting, which historically invoked the use of the term “Untitled” to access a specific (anti-establishmentarian) kind of authority, the label “Untitled” mutes the text to pre-established ways of reading, thinking, and marketing. Liberated by the absence of a title, the work performs through its inherent legibility. It is one step removed from a precisely given meaning, but still available to each and every reader’s interpretation through “saying and naming,” which is less readily proven “incorrect” in comparison to a prescriptive title. What thereby remains common among multiple audiences and readings stands its ground as a form of legible and persuasive “truth.” To entitle a text that studies an untitled building “Untitled” would ultimately carry with it all the unbridled optimism and utopianism of a more open and inclusive world order. The “Untitled” building text would ultimately aim to tell us more about ourselves, contemporary architecture, the will of society, and our human desires than we would ever have anticipated given, a priori, a mere title. An untitled text would force us to ask more questions about why something is written the way it is. Thus I am convinced that there is much to discover in studying the language of building objects, as *The Building* effectively does, through an “untitled” perspective.

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As Leon Batista Alberti argued in his *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* (long before theory’s postmodern turn), there is more to a building than can ever be understood by philosophy alone.<sup>14</sup> A building embodies cultural paradigms reflected in the ever-changing character of human exchange. We learn by reading—not only texts but also buildings, the language employed by architects being one of *building* with all its characteristics of form, material, space, technology, construction, and structure. Our buildings are *culturally riven* objects—programmed in a specific time and developed as an example of our potential. Human will, drives, culture, and intentions move our profession; every building embodies the history of its cultural creation. That history is in no way determined by any one creator or inventor. Nothing exists in a vacuum without a past, present, or future—that is, without an extreme, non-linear complexity of cultural influence and engagement. Authorial intent, while important, is never enough in itself to answer the challenges that face an epoch.

What then makes our discipline rich—culturally, philosophically, socially, politically, and anthropologically—is the complexity of the building process as it evolves through time, as it is recorded through time, and as it is available for study by the multitudes in time. We must therefore embrace the cultural dynamism constitutive of our profession and open it up to wider understanding, knowledge, readings, and re-readings *without prejudice*. This does not delimit our discipline, but greatly expands it.

All of us who are interested in buildings can be considered specialists and novices in something, working together to generate knowledge that moves culture in some way or another worthy of more inclusive—open—discourse and debate. All of us in architecture benefit equally from specialized knowledge beyond our own discipline. It remains essential to engage with others in pursuit of broader opinions and ideas outside of our specialization. However, it is our buildings—the artifacts we study and debate through discourse—that constitute our common ground. To study a building carefully reveals an understanding not only of the architect (author) and oneself (the reader), but also of society and culture at large (one's milieu). Buildings are evidentiary entities that at once inspire and contest what we think we know about life, existence, and the world. In embodying culture through history, they typically exceed our time and, often, ourselves. Moreover, they challenge our efforts to read, reread, and misread them. They point outside our present time and become our greatest hope to actually grasp any given point in history with any semblance of *objectivity*.

Each of us has something to offer the discipline. If *The Building* is a call for historians and theorists to study buildings more closely, then we should better educate historians and theorists about the practice of architecture as well as the visual/material language of building. If *The Building* is a call for architects to study buildings in order to improve the nuanced value of their work and be more in control of their theoretical discipline and the performativity of their designs, then we should better educate architects to write and think about buildings more precisely. In the art world, Robert Morris is an interesting example: he wrote and practiced simultaneously. In doing so, he positioned his work and others in the field, providing a verbal lens for reacting to the artwork of his time, including his own. The list of architects who have done something similar since Vitruvius is extensive and profound. Yet how many architects today write about and position their work in a meaningful, coherent manner? Is it problematic to historicize and theorize one's own building designs? Does writing about one's own work really delimit the potential readings of that work—not unlike a title might do? If so, then maybe architects as well as historians and theorists should find new ways to explore, represent, and think about building objects by liberating our discourse from the need to use titles.



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<sup>1</sup> See Stephen Phillips, “Architecture Industry: The L.A. Ten” in *Overdrive*, ed. Wim de Wit and Christopher Alexander (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2013), 184–199.

<sup>2</sup> **Name of author?** “In his own house: A Noted Architect Plays Games,” *House & Garden* Vol 133, no. 1 (January, 1968), 110.

<sup>3</sup> See Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987). See also Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York: Gullford Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> For more on Allen’s developing study of open and indeterminate forms of architecture, see Stan Allen, *Points and Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> See Michele Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books Random House, 1979). See Also Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on Control Societies” in *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Theory Out of Bounds, Volume 1) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadler (New York: Perennial Library, 1975), 74.

<sup>8</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3 1935–1938*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, trans. Markus Bullock, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 120.

<sup>9</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4 1938–1940*, ed. Michael W. Jennings and Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 389–400.

<sup>10</sup> For more on subject-object relationships in terms of choices that bear on character and personality, see Henri Bergson, “Chapter One: On The Selection of Images for Conscious Presentation. What our Body Means and Does,” in *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 17–76.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 73. See also Martin Heidegger, “Language,” and “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadler (New York: Perennial Library, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> See Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2015).

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<sup>13</sup> See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988).