

# The Fiction of Reason: Tafuri and the Avant-Garde

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Though many architects reject the system of rational urban planning by presenting utopian designs, critics like Manfredo Tafuri consider the most experimental projects of the 1960s and 1970s as meaningless paper architecture with no concern for the social reality of the city. He connects the contemporary architecture with the historical avant-garde of Italian rationalism, which was always related to social transformation and critical resistance against established society, and considers modernism as a development in which the avant-gardes' visions of utopia come to be recognized as an idealization of capitalism, a transfiguration of the rationality into autonomous form. Yet, Tafuri also relates Le Corbusier's rational designs to multiple readings that also include a surrealist sensibility. He constructs the architectural concepts around the struggle between the universal values represented by *nature* and the rational values represented by *technology*. A case in point is the *Beistegui Apartment* in Paris (1930–31) who was a collector of surrealist art.

The architecture of the 1960s and 1970s overthrew the modernist principle of formal composition, functional fit, and constructional logic by opening up the discipline to the realm of artificiality, consumer imagery, Pop art and science fiction aesthetics. Yet, critical positions, such as Tafuri, speak of a technocratic idealism, claiming that this submission to the present totalizing technologically advanced conditions of production and consumption would strip the emergent experimental lineage of a social and political efficacy.

Tafuri dismisses both the modernist ideology of the functionalist plan and the naïve belief in progress. Both positions make architecture the efficient agent of capitalist 'planification' and, indeed, complicitous with the commodity system, that fully arrived in postwar consumer culture. Hence, such projects cannot serve as *operative criticism*, which aims at the reengagement of the discipline, because the autonomy of architecture closely connected to its social functions.

1

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## Introduction: Tafuri's Operative Criticism

Though many architects reject the system of rational urban planning by presenting utopian designs, critics like Manfredo Tafuri consider the most experimental projects of Italian rationalism of the 1960s and 1970s as pure paper architecture and mystifications with no concern for the social reality of the city. He dismisses both the modernist ideology of the functionalist plan as well as the naïve belief in technology and progress. Both positions make architecture the efficient agent of capitalist 'planification' and, indeed, complicitous with the reification by the commodity system, that fully arrived in postwar consumer culture. Such projects cannot serve as *operative criticism*, which aims at the reengagement and reassessment of the discipline, because the autonomy of architecture closely connected to its social functions.

In his article "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language," 1974, Tafuri features Aldo Rossi's Analogous City, 1976 (Fig. 1), and claims that the observer of modern architecture "is forced to reduce to degree zero every ideology, every dream of social function, every utopian residue." (Tafuri, 1974, 48) With the title, he refers to René

Magritte's painting "La Philosophie dans le boudoir," 1947, that shows only an animated dress and a pair of shoes in an estranged, eroticized space. While the analogy between buildings and clothes dressing a human body is traditional, the image implies, for Tafuri, the notion of architecture as an ideological corpse.

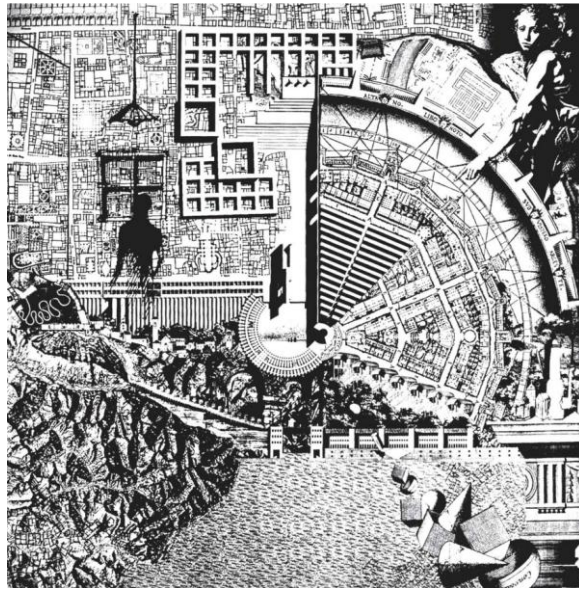


Fig. 1. *Analogous City* Rossi, Aldo – 1976 in Hays, K.M. 2000. *Architecture Theory Since 1968*. Cambridge, MIT Press, p. 154

The concept of architecture as animated but empty residue is the result of the *deprofessionalisation* of the discipline. (Tafuri, 1976, 176) The architect's decline as an ideologist is coupled with the decline of the architect's professional status. Building on ideas of Georg Simmel and Theodor W. Adorno, Tafuri attacks the position of architecture rendered as a pure economic factor stripped of its political and social contents. The crisis of the ideological function of architecture is tied to the "the pitiless self-exploration of its own objective commercialization." He links the modern city planning to the "mystified version of the functioning and reality of utopia."

Yet, the Enlightenment notions of ideology and rationality should be reconsidered in relation to the historic context in which they root. Society's ruling groups hold ideology as a total system of thought and oppress knowledge that could threaten the preservation of status and domination. The restrained and suppressed groups, by contrast, use utopia to demand for change and favor those thoughts that overturn the established system. Ideology thus refers to ideas that comprehend the present in terms of the past, whereas utopia goes beyond the present towards the future. Within this view, the utopian visions of Tony Garnier's *Cité Industrielle*, Antonio Sant'Elia's *Città Nuova*, and Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse* are planned as urban ideologies which are, in Mannheim's sense of ideology, plans for reconstruction within the established order.

Tafuri's understanding of ideology and utopia points to the contradictory conditions that are typical for the present capitalist-industrial production. One of the most important roles of the architect is therefore criticism of the ideology of architecture itself.

He emphasizes the utter uselessness of counter ideologies against the overpowering myth of history. In *Theories and History of Architecture*, 1976, He discusses Roland Barthes' notion of history: by means of myths "the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature." (Barthes, 1972, 141) Myth is depoliticized speech, it makes things innocent and gives them a kind of natural justification. Barthes continues with "ideologically all that is not bourgeois is obliged to *borrow* from the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois ideology can therefore spread over everything and in so doing lose its name without risk."

For this reason, Tafuri argues, instead of a specific class aesthetic in art or architecture, for an operative class criticism that demystifies both architectural history and contemporary production. It is useless to search for architectural alternatives only within the discipline itself, because "reflection on architecture, inasmuch as it is a criticism of the concrete 'realized' ideology of architecture itself, cannot but go beyond this and arrive at a specifically political dimension." (Tafuri, 1976, 182) Rather, class criticism is understood as a mission of class service "to do away with impotent and ineffectual myths, which so often serve as illusions that permit the survival of anachronistic 'hopes in design'."

Therefore, Tafuri connects the contemporary architecture and the historical avant-garde of Italian rationalism, which was always related to social transformation and critical resistance against established society, and considers, according to Michael Hays, modernism as a development in which "the avant-gardes' visions of utopia come to be recognized as an idealization of capitalism, a transfiguration of the latter's rationality into the rationality of autonomous form." (Hays, 2000, 2) This idea resonates with Victor Shklovsky's defense of absolute autonomy in art, particularly in literature, because only such a position renders the design unsuitable for any propagandistic purpose. His notion of *ostraneniye*, or "making the familiar strange," denotes a distortion of the established code, which enables new configurations both in artistic and social terms.

There is an essential difference, however, between avant-garde art and architecture. As architecture operates in the real space of the city, it is able to go beyond the position of art as mere representation of the modern condition. In modernist urbanism "indeterminacy itself is given specific form, and offered as the only determinateness possible for the city as a whole." (Tafuri, 1976, 169) Only architecture can innovate and reprogram the city as a *social machine*.

### The Fiction of Reason

In an apparent mutual irritation between Tafuri and the new generation, Tafuri argues that "the formal terrorism of Eisenman, the polysemia of Graves, the rigorism of Meier, [...] the ingenuous aphorisms of Robert Stern, the 'jokes' of Koolhaas, do they actually not represent broad trends that wind through the panorama of the architectural work of the last decade?" (Tafuri, 1987, 300) And in "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir" he likewise speaks of the cynical play of Koolhaas. Even further, architects such as Superstudio call him the enemy. Answering such attacks with equal brazenness, Koolhaas states (van Dijk, 1978, 18): "Tafuri and his supporters hate architecture. They declare architecture dead. For them, architecture is a series of corpses in the morgue [...]. Except, for some inexplicable reason, Aldo Rossi."

Koolhaas alludes to the cover image of Tafuri's *Architecture and Utopia* when it was published in English in 1976, which was Aldo Rossi's *L'architecture assassinée*, 1975 (Fig. 2), showing an assemblage of architectural fragments both historical and modern. His formal compositions, which are not based on real sites, reduce natural features and historical image of existing cities to mere

empty signs. In his collage *Analogous City*, 1976, it becomes a collage of frozen morphological types that are subject to changing meanings. Rossi's analogous architecture and its concept of autonomous types is a neorationalist return to the Enlightenment method of typological forms. (Rossi, 1982)

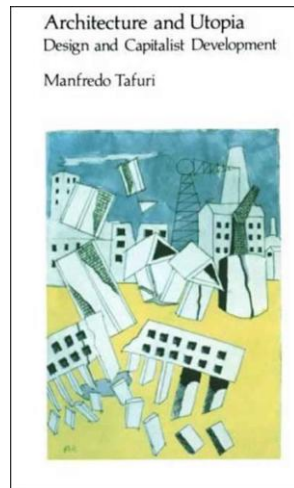


Fig. 2. *L'architecture assassinée* Rossi, Aldo – 1975 in Tafuri, M. 1976. *Architecture and Utopia*. Cambridge: MIT Press, cover

Following Tafuri, Giovanni Battista Piranesi's interpretation of the *Campo Marzio*, 1762, is a revealing example of the Enlightenment dialectic on architecture and city planning: "The obsessive reiteration of the inventions reduces the whole organism to a sort of gigantic 'useless machine.' Rationalism would seem thus to reveal its own irrationality." (Tafuri, 1976, 15) Piranesi conveys within the order and regularity of the parts a certain idea of chaos and irregularity, so that the *Campo Marzio* lacks of structure and control over the individual elements. The typological forms eventually dissolve into an assemblage of fragments devoid of their autonomy and significance.

By contrast, Eisenman rejects the Enlightenment aspiration of a typological source of design as a mere *fiction of reason*. (Hays, 2000, 526) In the Renaissance, the origins of ideal form were sought in cosmological sources and anthropomorphic geometry, like the Vitruvian man, in order to provide a composition of harmony and divine order of the single parts. This Renaissance belief in an ideal origin of the world also implies an ideal end, or goal such as finding a specific form. Contrary to the Renaissance principle, the idea of Enlightenment considers architecture as the product of reason and the final form as the result of the rational design process. This idea that the origin of ideal form lies in reason leads to the catalogue of type forms, the end is the typical composition. Eisenman argues: What both the Renaissance and the modern relied on as the basis of truth was found to require, in essence, faith. Analysis was a form of simulation; knowledge was a new religion. Similarly, it can be seen that architecture never embodied reason; it could only state the desire to do so; there is no architectural image of reason. (Hays, 2000, 527) Bernard Tschumi's *Advertisements for Architecture*, 1976–79, show buildings as site of a crime, or in a state of decay, for instance the *Villa Savoye* (Fig 3). In both cases, architecture has become a sign of *transgression* (Tschumi, 1997, 107): "sensuality has been known to overcome even the most rational of buildings. Architecture is



the ultimate erotic act. Carry it to excess and it will reveal both the traces of reason and the sensual experience of space. Simultaneously.”

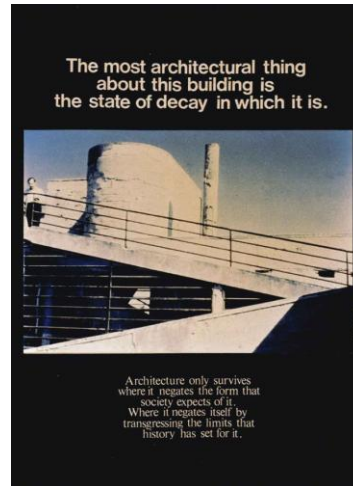


Fig. 3. *Advertisements for Architecture* Tschumi, Bernard – 1976 [http://www.tschumi.com, accessed 6 October, 2016]

Although Le Corbusier’s work is usually connected to rational and functional premises, and he does not directly relate to surrealism, there are several irrational elements in his work. In “Machine et Mémoire, the City in the Work of Le Corbusier” Manfredo Tafuri relates Le Corbusier’s designs to multiple readings that also include a surrealist sensibility. (Tafuri, 1981) He constructs the architectural concepts around the struggle between the universal values represented by *nature* and the rational values represented by *technology*. A case in point is the *Beistegui Apartment* in Paris, 1930–31, for Carlos de Beistegui who was a collector of surrealist art. Tafuri interprets the first floor of the house – which originally had no electric lighting, the only lighting was provided by candles – as an interplay between the natural and technological landmarks of Paris. What looks like a cockpit may signify the ultimate distance between the two opposing principles that on roof level are finally reconciled. For the rooftop is conceived as a room, but with a floor of grass that opens toward the sky, its view opening to the ‘natural’ environment of the city, such as the Arc de Triomphe.

Following Tafuri, the opposition between nature and machine can be reconciled only symbolically, though. Similarly, the *Open Hand* sculpture in Chandigarh is a plastic gesture of a cosmic image that links the earth with the sky, an *axis mundi*, but which also reveals the tragic symbol of Le Corbusier’s struggle to assimilate universal values and technological devices, a vision that eventually failed. (Sekler, 1977) Tafuri also interprets Le Corbusier’s *Ronchamp Chapel* as a surrealist ambiguity between inside and outside, with the placement of two identical altars: one interior altar and one exterior altar oriented towards the landscape.

In reference to Le Corbusier, Sigfried Giedion suggests in *Time, Space and Architecture*, 1952, that “the synthesis between the rational-geometric and the mystic-organic principle runs through all the late work of Le Corbusier.” (Giedion, 1952, lv) As examples, Giedion cites the chapel at Ronchamp as well, and the roof elements of the *Villa Savoye* which can be interpreted as surrealist props: the rooftop window opening neither to an interior nor exterior or the chimney that appears as a column without supporting load. But contrary to Tafuri’s later reading, Giedion interprets Le Corbusier’s

effort to reconcile the rational and the irrational realms as an alchemical transformation of opposite principles, a vital operation to make modernism complete. A further example of the duality in Le Corbusier's architectural thinking is the rooftop of the *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille, 1947–52. The space is segregated from the city by a 1.60 meter high wall, in a manner somewhat like a sacred precinct, with an artificial topography that comprises various individual objects, such as an open-air theater, swimming pool, children's play area, and two terraces for sunbathing and sculptural ventilation shafts.

### Conclusion: Tafuri and the Avant-Garde

The experimental architecture of the 1960s and 1970s overthrew the modernist principle formal composition, functional fit, and constructional logic by opening up the discipline to the realm of artificiality, consumer imagery, Pop art and science fiction aesthetics. Yet, critical positions such as Tafuri speak of a technocratic idealism, claiming that this submission to the present totalizing technologically advanced conditions of production and consumption would strip the emergent experimental lineage of a social and political efficacy. (Tafuri, 1987)

As a built example, he refers to Mies' *Seagram* building, which might be the paramount example of critical resistance, and Tafuri's interpretation of its glass surface, where abstraction becomes a neutral mirror of the urban chaos around timeless purity. (Tafuri, Dal Co, 1979, 342) Even Mies' precedent projects, the two designs of *Glass Skyscrapers* for Berlin, 1922, demonstrate architecture's ability for resistance because of the autonomy and the materiality of the refractive glass surface within the repetitive steel structural elements (Hays, 1997, 291): "Abstraction – the pure sound of the Sirens, the organizing absent presence – is the maximal limit of the avant-garde." Through abstraction, architecture acquires a means of resistance to escape the reification, to refuse to be a mere thing among others. Koolhaas also links the position of resistance to the urban, for "the city will always be the screen on which the avant-garde projects its ambitions, against which the avant-garde prepares its (usually futile) stratagems of substitution." (Koolhaas, 1997, 294) The European avant-garde in 1922 experimented with the skyscraper typology that already existed in America as an "unacknowledged, invisible utopia, a section of 'pure' avant-garde."

Though the elision of avant-garde with autonomy and originality is common sense, the idea of originality is a modernist myth, particularly in the case of the avant-garde. (Krauss, 1985) The origins of the French term *avant-garde* have specifically military associations of an advance guard or front guard of soldiers in a military manoeuvre or expedition. In contrast to the modernist values of authenticity, medium specificity, autonomy, and originality – which Walter Benjamin held in suspicion – the historical avant-garde projects rather involved themselves with new technological means of reproduction, multimedia and between-media practices, events and collective modes of reception (e.g. an extraordinary fascination with film) and the attempt to collapse the disjunction between life and art.

In contrast to the collaboration of many other architects with authoritarian ideology, Eisenman and Hays – following Tafuri – are among the prominent figures that succeed in embodying resistance and criticality against the late-capitalist consumer society. For Adorno, "art remains alive only through its social power to resist society [...]. What it contributes to society is not some communication with the same but rather something more mediate – resistance." (Adorno, 1970, 335) Resistance reproduces social development in aesthetic terms without directly imitating it.

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