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Rethinking the Human in Technology Driven Architecture

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Despite the attempt to transcribe with accuracy the debates from the workshop, the editors wish to apologise in advance for any inaccuracies of the interventions of individuals that could be attributed to the quality of recording.
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Have we ever been Postmodern?
The Essential Tension within the Metamodern Condition
“The contemporary architectural style that has achieved hegemony within the contemporary architectural avant-garde can be best understood as a research program based upon the parametric paradigm. We propose to call this style: “Parametricism”. Parametricism is the great new style after Modernism. Postmodernism and Deconstructivism were transitional episodes that ushered in this new, long wave of research and innovation.”

Zaha Hadid and Patrick Schumacher (2008)

“My question will always be: can interactive Architecture be beautiful? It is certainly necessary and functional, but can it compete with historic architecture and be appreciated as good, relevant and beautiful? I believe that it can.”

Kas Oosterhuis (2009)

The call for papers of the conference defined its own frame for discussing our reflections on the human in the age of technology-driven architecture. This paper will start by relating the conference call with some selected excerpts from Kas Oosterhuis, Zaha Hadid and Patrick Schumacher’s recent texts. By doing so, it will eventually reframe the questions posed by the call for papers and offer a broader alternative perspective of elucidating them. This paper as a whole should therefore be considered as a contribution to the methodology of our reflecting on our present condition and the relevant terms that can drive our debates about it.

The selected excerpt from a recent manifesto by Zaha Hadid and Patrick Schumacher (2008) reveals their current self-understanding. Having recently articulated their own parametricism, they opt to present themselves as the direct descendants of modernism, by simultaneously keeping a clear distance from postmodernism and deconstructivism. Meanwhile, Kas Oosterhuis (2009) was recently wondering whether interactive Architecture can also be beautiful – since it is already standing and functioning as a construction. His question echoes Le Corbusier’s plea for an architecture that moves us. This emotive element draws the line between real architecture and a mere construction that is able to hold itself together. On a similar note, Oosterhuis (2011) seems almost reluctant to call his most recent work ‘architecture’. In his latest book, he opts for a title that reveals his concerns by echoing Le Corbusier once again: Towards a New Kind of Building. The deepest concerns of both architects rest on undoubtedly classical grounds, though. In fact, they reach way back to a Vitruvian origin.

However, upon reading the call for papers, one cannot help but notice the fact that it focuses entirely on developments that have taken place over the last decade, when the abovementioned architects express feelings that develop within our modern predicament and go way further back in time. Stemming from some of the pioneering figures of a recent data-driven practice, these feelings need to be elucidated and clearly articulated if we are to gain a deeper understanding and a critical awareness of our contemporary condition which I intend to call ‘metamodern’. Focusing in the last decade would eventually mean ignoring the long roots of the phenomena that characterise our present condition and the latest developments in the field of technology-driven architecture. It would mean taking for granted what is most crucially at stake: Is it at all possible for us to reconcile the value-driven humanistic per-
spective with a technological perspective that relies on the physical and the factual? Can the data-starving IT really offer the key to answering the distinctively modern problem of the fact-value dichotomy? The call for papers undoubtedly strikes for a crucial balance between accepting IT and technology-driven architecture while maintaining the criticisms that have been addressed to it regarding its acknowledged humanistic shortcomings. However, it is highly doubtful that this desired balance can be attained by focusing on the last ten years only. Although few would be unwilling to admit its often ingenious implementation of the latest developments in IT, the recent guise of architecture as a data-driven practice is essentially intertwined with a complex web of relations with wider historical and theoretical movements that have yet to be clearly, let alone fully, addressed. If that is the case, then it is clear that the place of the human in technology-driven architecture cannot be truly reflected upon and comprehended when considered as a matter of the last decade.

Hadid and Schumacher’s remarks serve as to pose a thought-provoking challenge. Any serious attempt to reflect upon our present condition should start by exploring the implications of their abovementioned distantiation from postmodernism and deconstructivism. Why would a pioneer of technology-driven architectural practice denounce postmodernism, when IT is in fact at the heart of the postmodern condition? Combined with the Wittgensteinian notion of language games and an emphasis on particular stories and narratives instead of universal metanarratives, IT is there right from the start, being already heralded as the driving force of a radical change in the production of knowledge in Jean-François Lyotard’s (1979) widely discussed attempt at epistemology, which was to define the postmodern condition. How should we understand Hadid’s and Schumacher’s statement of apparent distantiation, then, when IT is clearly at the heart of their work, too? A fruitful way is to read it as a theoretical challenge: If we are to understand our present condition, a whole generation later, it may be more useful to wonder whether we, the architects, have ever been postmodern in the way that Lyotard proposed, and if a term like that still applies in elucidating our present condition. This second leg of the question calls for making a stand for the wider cultural issues and philosophical problems that have arisen during this roughly three-decades-long period of time that has elapsed since postmodernism first entered the intellectual fray. Posing such a kind of question in a general manner, especially when it concerns terms like modernity and postmodernism which have historically proven rather loose in themselves, certainly risks oversimplifications and a kind of inability to acknowledge the often admirable argumentative architecture of the diverse approaches to these wide cultural subjects. By covering the various theoretical facets that these terms have presently come to incorporate in a few pages means that we most probably will not be able to satisfy the usual scholarly standards of analysis. However, this is the form in which these intellectual currents usually enter the public domain and shape the dominant ideological trends. Thus, we seem obliged to dare and plead into this mostly insecure and unstable general ground in the hope that we are not unfair or inaccurate to the individual theoretical approaches that are presently labelled as ‘postmodern’. Only after attempting to define the contours of a contemporary intellectual uneasiness, can we return to the special case of architecture, if we are to shed a refreshing light upon our contemporary problems. Only after having attempted to face the question of postmodernism in its more general form, can we recognise the way in which it makes sense when posed in the architectural domain.
I.

The question “Have we ever been postmodern?” indeed alludes to Bruno Latour’s (1991) infamous suggestion that we have never been modern. According to him, we are essentially amodern, as even our most cherished ‘pure’ practices of modernity, like the development of modern science, are always mediated hybrid forms, internally contaminated with the residue of heterogeneous constructions that should have been suppressed or imaginarily exorcised, in case the modern spirit had prevailed. Thus, the Great Divide between man and nature, between modern and traditional culture is a kind of intellectual bias, nothing more than an imaginary construction that was never attained on the practical level. There is in fact no discontinuity, chasm or asymmetry between the moderns and the ancients. Man is still intertwined with Nature; Science is still not clearly distinguished from Politics. Latour seems to approach modernism primarily as a mode of thinking, as the adoption of a certain viewpoint or worldview, a kind of ideological prejudice that filters our perception of reality and obstructs us from realising the essential interconnections between what appears as the orderly divided areas of knowledge. In that sense, he wants to be amodern – not modern at all. Hybridisation is the norm and this is the case even for the domains of knowledge that are considered to retain an almost absolute degree of purity.

Yet, according to Fredric Jameson (1991), it has been exactly a kind of hybridisation that was visible in the world of everyday life, this common presence of automobiles and trains moving in the backdrop of a mostly neoclassical or baroque urban environment, for instance, that originally gave rise both to a dynamic sense of modernity and its special relation to history, as well as to the idea of progress in the first place. The total dominance of the simulacrum that followed in the age that coincides with the third stage of capitalism, accompanied by the loss of historical awareness and the future itself, are in fact the characteristics that distinguish the modern from the postmodern. What is extremely interesting in Jameson’s approach is that he spots the clearest conscious expressions of the modern/postmodern ethos in architecture and the built environment. Jameson relates postmodernism with a special kind of space and a special kind of human consciousness, a hyper-space ideally perceived by a hyper-consciousness that exceeds the modern (and Cartesian) conceptions of space and the human subject. His latest work that invokes a “spatial” kind of dialectic (Jameson, 2009) and in fact follows 1991’s plea for a cognitive mapping of our place within the postmodern condition, which is partly inspired by Kevin Lynch's (1960) seminal work on the *Image of the City*, are not to be ignored, either. It seems we have not ceased to be in need of this kind of cognitive mapping and we should probably show the intellectual rigour required for carrying out this task.

I am reluctant to agree with Latour that we should abolish the idea of the Great Divide between the modern condition and the condition before that. I can follow him in rejecting the idea of any kind of discontinuity or of a change that can be simultaneously sudden and radical in the historical course of human activity. This unavoidably continuous course doesn’t exclude the possibility of reaching a point in history from the viewpoint of which it seems that there is no way to turn back, though. When we have attained that viewpoint, it is certain that we can re-interpret the past as a forerunner to the present condition or trace selected crucial characteristics of other periods that shaped the modern notions in a decisive way. If that is the case, then modernity is indeed a problem for us and the Great Divide not only reappears, but
it immediately takes the form of a problematic periodisation, since we seem capable
to pinpoint it at any point in history, wherever we can trace the genesis of the ‘mod-
ern notion of X’ from the early modern 15th century (Toulmin, 1990) or, like Nietzsche
(1872) and Bernard Williams (2002), even further back to the age of Socrates and Thu-
cydides. This should not be interpreted as a claim that the moderns’ often nostalgic
depictions of the past are unqualifiedly correct (and this is the point where one could
meet Latour again), but as an indication that once certain questions have been raised
in the way of modernity (read: Enlightenment), we can no longer be satisfied with his-
torical or philosophical accounts which do not face or provide any answer to them. In
that sense, modernity is intellectually irreversible, although it can still “be reversed in
historical fact, given a substantial enough political power or natural catastrophe’ (Wil-

If modernity itself is always posed to us as a problem, as a challenge for develop-
ing our theoretical, intellectual and practical tools for coping with a world that is in a
rapid process of modernisation, then the term “postmodern” itself is representative of
a rather awkward condition in our attempt to cope with this major problem that mo-
dernity represents for us. The prefix “post-” indicates succession in time, rather than
heralding a situation that is radically different from the modern one. It is not certain
if postmodernism could ever lead us to exiting, overcoming or opposing modernity
in a polemical way, as some of its guises seemed to imply. By developing as a kind of
countermovement, postmodernity was always bound to the essence of that against
which it was rebelling. By radicalising the critical methodology of modernity while of-
fering deconstructive genealogies of the fundamental modern ideals, postmodernity
could only end up in an inextricable entanglement in modernity. In fact, even Lyotard
(1988) himself in his later writings preferred to talk about ‘rewriting modernity’ as a
term more suitable than ‘postmodernism’, which was treated as redundant by its main
inventor from that point on. If we are indeed to abandon the notion of postmodern-
ism, this may be due to an inherent contradiction. The widely heralded postmodern
motto “anything goes”, as it was firstly posed by the likes of Paul Feyerabend for in-
stance, should first and foremost be read as a call for the absolute freedom of a crea-
tivity that is not bounded by the chains of any grand narrative; at the same time, it
is an ideal that can never be realised: if it was realised, it would immediately have to
be rejected! We can never continue to hold an ironical kind of distance to the sum
of our web of most basic beliefs, even if we have managed an almost impossible feat
of gradually replacing each and every one of our beliefs with another. What’s more,
postmodernism doesn’t seem able to provide the suitable kind of motives for such an
unbounded creativity. Why should anyone really cater to invent endlessly new vocab-
ularies and redescrions of language games and not stick with the ones already at
hand, when at the end of the day none of them is proven to be superior to another or
even support a claim to the truth? By putting the emphasis on difference, postmod-
ernism has led itself to a short-circuit. By strongly opposing modernity’s inherent he-
gemonising tendencies that could lead to totalitarianism, the postmodern condition
secured a space for the oppressed and minority voices, only for them to retain their
current status quo and develop in a juxtaposed seclusion from other voices. Yet, this
emancipatory dimension of postmodernism is paradoxically associated with the end
of utopian thinking and the rejection of the grand narratives. The separate groups and
voices are left as they stand in their polyphony without a clear vision for their future.
This loss of the future is particularly evident in times of crisis like ours, this third era of modernity, when the decisively modern and, in its core, ethical question “What should we do?” returns with renewed ferocity. The question is put forth in the sense of “Where should we be going?”. Postmodernism cannot answer it, because it opposes any kind of commitment to a minimum of convictions that can produce propositions which are not afraid to – even tentatively – claim truth status. Yet, it is exactly this virtue of commitment to normative or regulative beliefs that postmodernism lacks which is what really matters when guiding our action on the horizon of a desired common future. Therefore, although postmodernism and its recent guise of postcolonial studies may still seem significantly prolific in areas like comparative literature, it has already started showing its limits.

The feeling that postmodernism has most probably ran its course is gradually becoming common and shared around the globe. Nicolas Bourriaud (2009) has recently proposed the notion of the altermodern, the exemplary hero of which is the figure of the radicant artist. The radicant is happily participating in the multicultural flow of people around the world and is open to communicating with them, while at the same time retaining his roots to his homeland culture (through ‘mobile’ practices that can be as ordinary and everyday as cooking, for example). More recently, the exhibition titled “Postmodernism. Style and Subversion 1970-1990” at the Victoria and Albert Museum triggered a slew of articles that more or less herald the death of postmodernism.3 I am not convinced by the prospects they offer, though. In a way quite similar to that of Bourriaud, Edward Docx (2011) is pleading for the dawn of the age of authenticism now that we can very well understand that postmodernism is dead. Even if one could surpass the doubt of the current relevance of this return to a term of the Heideggerian discourse which developed in the climax of modernity to be explored by postmodern thinkers, his view of authenticism is rather limited, too. The only ground for his argument is a reappreciation of the authentic in the global marketplace. This notion seems too feeble to sustain our present predicament. Although one could agree with Hari Kunzru (2011) that the 9-11 attacks were also a blow to postmodernism as an intellectual current, his notion that postmodernism was ‘essentially pre-digital’ has to be avoided. The internet is definitely not to blame for the murder of postmodernism, since – as we have already mentioned – it was a vital component of the postmodern condition from the moment of its inception in 1979. Hari Kunzru’s argument rests on statistics regarding the bibliographical occurrence of the terms ‘postmodernism’ and ‘internet’ since 1975 provided by Google ngrams. However, the causal explanation he attempts is quite different from and should not be confused with mere statistical correlation – it requires much more than that, i.e. decent theorising.

II.

At the end of the day, although the question of postmodernism remains open, it seems that our current situation seems inescapable and, in that sense, we can never not be modern; nor can we ever be premodern again.4 We can still try to elucidate our unique modernity, though. Could we finally face modernity as a whole, not in the narrowly polemical direction that was often followed by postmodernism? We are now able to see the whole modern phenomenon in the light of the shortcomings of post-
modernism itself. This is a perspective that was not available to any previous generation of thinkers and writers. Now, more than ever, it seems that our task is to reflect upon the modern phenomenon as a whole in a way that manages to include the dead ends of postmodern thinking, with the added fuel of the motivation provided by our presently apparent need to move forward. We are certainly on the grounds of a hermeneutical kind of metamodernity.

To elucidate this last term, one could draw an analogy with the way in which Alfred Tarski (1944) used a richer meta-language (that contained the truth predicate) in order to provide an extensional definition of truth for an object-language. We can most conveniently detect the distinction of object-language and meta-language in the case of translation, in sentences like «“Schnee ist weiß” is true (in German) if and only if snow is white». In this example, German is the object-language and English is the meta-language that allows us to speak of the satisfaction conditions of truth in German. What would that meta-language be in the case of modernity, though?

Without ignoring any widely admitted differences between the modern and the postmodern condition, the thinker of the metamodern condition is called to work on their deeper existential ground, their common root or source. The liminal question of metamodernity would then be: Could we possibly go beyond the one and only correct interpretation, but also beyond the consummative post-modern equalisation (or rather neutralisation or elimination) of every interpretation within the closed sum of an unsociable multiplicity? This would probably involve moving away from a fixed truth, as well as from the infinite interior of self-referentiality, the imaginary non-existence of any truth whatsoever. At a time when the major questions have considerably lost their dramatic weight, nobody is looking for answers. Yet, as time goes by and postmodernism is exceedingly running its course, it becomes all the more evident that its formerly euphoric and playful nihilism leads to a dramatic uneasiness, an hitherto unforeseen numbness. What seemed to be the liberation from the artificial identity of every kind of ideology (that is, the metaphysical and secular idealisms), has turned out to be a step on the vacuum. There was nothing at all outside the endless interior we struggled to overcome. Being metamodern means having the intellectual rigour to re-pose the major questions in a way that can help them regain their weight.

Thirty years ago, the prefix “meta-“ would immediately trigger the intellectual alarm of an early postmodern thought: Weren't we supposed to get rid of all this overarching second-level kind of thinking in the first place? Could we just as easily return to endowing our trust on metanarratives like we did in the pre-war modern times? We should not treat the term ‘metamodernity’ in its strongest epistemological and metaphysical connotations, though. In the sense that we are avoiding here, metamodernity would also herald a kind of a triumphant exodus from or a surpassing modernity. This is definitely not the case here. We should rather understand and employ the term in the same way we currently understand metaphilosophy: even if we cannot exit our philosophical way of posing problems and thinking about them, we can still reflect upon our philosophising and its method, just as well as we reflect upon any other kind of practical activity. In that sense, our current metamodern condition doesn't mean we have escaped modernity. It implies a re-enactment of our reflection upon it with the added experience gained by postmodern thinking.
III.

After all this general and wider discussion on our current condition and its connections with the ones that preceded it, it is now time to return to the architectural domain and its own specificities through the questions we posed at the beginning of this paper. As we have already witnessed, Jameson heralds the built environment and the architectural domain itself as an exemplary manifestation of postmodernism that contributes to our understanding of the phenomenon as a whole. What could be said about architecture and this notion of metamodernity we just sketched? In which sense should we pose the question ‘Have we ever been postmodern?’ to the architectural domain?

I think there is indeed a strong sense in which our architecture has never been postmodern. Yes, we have definitely been postmodern in the sense defined by Charles Jencks and his architectural language of double-coding etc. In fact, ever since the publication of his influential work on postmodernism, we, the architects, consciously become Jencksonian postmodernists for a rather short period of time. However, I don’t think we have ever been Lyotardian postmodernists – at least, not in a conscious way. I would like to propose that MVRDV’s work – in VPRO, for instance – with its explicit emphasis on IT and the construction of stories already represents a kind of unconscious Lyotardian postmodernism. Lyotard’s (1979) “Report on Knowledge” focused on the production and evaluation of knowledge in the age of digital diffusion of information. MVRDV’s work unconsciously follows a Lyotardian program, in the sense that they base their architectural endeavour on a conception of the flow of information and its consequences for architectural practice. The introductory text for their work on VPRO attempts the definition of the architectural object in contemporary terms. Their intentions are already clear from the opening sentence: “Architecture is an interface. Not just now: it always has been” (MVRDV, 1997, p. 3). Their approach rejects an artistic approach to architecture, moving its emphasis on the double role of information in architecture as interface. Traditional architecture is a source of information that can be collected in a statistical database, whereas the element of interaction supplies the defining characteristic of the IT age. “Form is […] dependent on […] the handling of information about reality. A part of the ‘unexpressible’ aspect of architecture has come down on the side of its statistical treatment” (MVRDV, 1997, p. 4). The VPRO book constantly reminds the reader that this is not the presentation of a building, but that of a story. Just like architecture, the book is defining our contact with the reality (of the built), by handling information. “[I]n our own times the handling of information is becoming a basic code for acquiring knowledge about reality” (MVRDV, 1997, p. 9). This almost Lyotardian remark does not lead to any kind of significant formal eclecticism from the collected database of past architectural styles. Thanks to the computer, architecture as interface forms an horizontal relationship with reality. Gone is the hierarchical practice of past architecture that rested upon a creator who maintained a vertical categorical relationship with reality. The computer introduces the horizontal dimension to this relation without totally abolishing the primacy of the creator. The conception of architecture as interface rejects any kind of relation to an objective understanding of the world. The transformation of interface-architecture itself transforms in turn our very reality. The history of architecture can be then re-interpreted from the viewpoint of interaction and information. A more precise definition of architecture would then
be that of an “interface of computerized reality [in a] direct relationship between information and form” (MVRDV, 1997, p. 16). The distance from a Jencksian, as well as the resemblance to a Lyotardian, kind of architectural postmodernism is apparent.

But what if we would self-consciously aim for a genuinely Lyotardian postmodernism in architecture? MVRDV’s approach seems to imply that we can move further than proposing IT and digital technologies as a meta-language that can handle and incorporate diverse design logics from ancient and traditional systems of harmony to recent green design, as seems to be the norm today, which works with a clearly Jencksian logic at its core. Could our re-visiting of Lyotard’s texts prove to be a source of self-conscious architectural inspiration with IT positively at its core? If that is the case, then we, the architects of the metamodern condition, can realise that we have never been self-consciously postmodern. On the other hand, if metamodernity means recasting postmodernism in the terms of modernity and vice versa, with an emphasis on the return to a common future, it is still unclear whether IT and technology-driven architecture can provide a satisfying reply. A Socratic reading of the modern question par excellence: “Where should we be going?” turns modernity into a deeply ethical problem, the problem of autonomous commitment to laws that we ourselves pose to ourselves, according to the Kantian ethical project. The aftermath of the Hegelian criticism has left us in doubt about the a priori necessity of a feat that was in principle historical, therefore contingent. In the years that followed, modernity was somehow condemned to constantly re-iterate this debate between Kant and Hegel without proving able to overcome it (Pippin, 1999). It is this kind of a deep ambivalent feeling towards our own autonomy that undoubtedly drives Oosterhuis to the need to appeal to a classical conception of architecture, exactly at the point when his work is at the forefront of technology-driven architecture.

There is certainly an essential tension here. It no longer seems plausible to believe we should be rid of the technical rationality that is intertwined with recent developments in the field of IT. We should instead treat it as revealing yet again the multifarious nature of our discipline and as an urgent need to deepen our understanding of the special characteristics of our contemporary condition and its relation to modernity. Having at our disposal both the results of modernity and the conclusions of postmodernity as an expression of the guilty conscience of the former, we are now in the position to treat modernity ‘homeopathetically’ as both our greatest achievement and our greatest tragedy at the same time. It would then be time to return to the complex web of relations that contextualises the development of a critically responsive architecture of the last decade in the depth of its relation with modernity, thus advancing our all too human understanding of technology-driven architecture. There are two ways in which one can be lost: (a) when he has no map of the territory and (b) when he has a map of the territory but cannot define his position on that map. I hope that this paper provided at least a rough sketch of that map or a way of positioning oneself on a rather sketchy map.

Notes

1 It should be noted that postmodernism is just one of the available answers to that problem, which usually involves thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, to name just
a few. Other proposed answers include a desire for a partial return to essentially premodern ideals (offered by the likes of Hannah Arendt or Alasdair Maclntyre) or a self-aware defence of ‘the unfinished project’ of modernity (offered by the likes of Stephen Toulmin and Jürgen Habermas).

2 Neil Gaiman offers an ample demonstration of this wish turned into an imbearable curse in his “Calliope” story from the Sandman saga. When writer Richard Madoc holds Calliope, the Muse, captive in his attic, Morpheus takes his toll on him by granting his original wish for inspiration to the extreme degree. Madoc suffers from a literal brainstorm of his endless inspiration and ideas for stories he cannot even jot down – let alone write.


4 This could be the case not only due to a present lack of the relevant metaphysical context, but also due to our much different practices of social life and institutions that support it. Cf. Williams (2002) and Dworkin (2011) respectively.


6 This is the term Fredric Jameson himself uses to describe his own method. It is inspired by young Karl Marx’s work on early German history.

References


