Architectural Design

Re-Imagining the Avant-Garde: Revisiting the architecture of the 1960s and 1970s

ENDURING EXPERIMENTS

How the Architectural Avant-Garde Lives On

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The 1960s and 1970s saw a significant increase in architectural projects seeking to redefine the discipline, many of which have gone on to become seminal works. Loosely grouped together under the term 'avant-garde', these projects and ideologies remain highly influential today. Like the historical avant-garde of the early part of the 20th century, this 'neo' or 'late' avant-garde[1] was not singular in its formal, conceptual or political ambitions. It encompassed divergent geographic and cultural situations, with a wide variety of aims, representational techniques and political views – differences that existed even among the protagonists of individual subsections such as the Italian Radical movement emerging from Florence or the Whites and Greys stationed on the East Coast of the US. Their common objective, however, was to assert architecture once again as an autonomous discipline, as a political provocateur and a means of social satire.

The conceptual and often contradictory nature of the projects lends them a timeless presence; as Pino Brugellis and Manuel Orazi argue of the Italian Radicals, 'they are susceptible to different interpretations and meanings, without ever exhausting their explosive charge: a sort of

architectural Big Bang that continues to expand today, while keeping alive the chaos of its origins'.[2] The period produced reflections on issues such as the looming ecological crisis, the Vietnam War, Modernism's increasing focus on market-driven ideals of efficiency and technology, and a shift in society to a condition of hyper-consumerism.[3] For historian Marco De Michelis, this neo-avant-garde was an eclectic group of 'architects, philosophers, and historians, whose diverse ideas were connected only by a common determination to alter the obsolete tenets of modernist practice and to reevaluate architecture in terms of the new imperatives of the postwar world'.[4]

This issue of AD seeks to explore this ambition and energy in the context of contemporary architectural practice. It examines the work of the 1960s and 1970s as a historical precedent, a barometer of an experimental design ethos, framing its protagonists as instigators of new formal techniques. In doing so it illuminates the creativity inherent in methodologies that build reciprocity between this period and contemporary design cultures.

There have been many studies on the methods and motives of these historical projects. The intention of this issue is not to create a new history in the typical sense, but rather to represent how the influence of the historical avant-garde directly resonates with architectural practice some 50 years later. To understand its impact, the contributions are presented under four main themes: 'The Avant-Garde as Precedent', 'The Spirit of the Avant-Garde', 'Utopia' and 'Formal Repetition'.

The Avant-Garde as Precedent

Today, references to Superstudio, Peter Eisenman, Archizoom and John Hejduk abound. By examining the reinterpretation and application of such avant-garde positions in current practices, the aim is to elucidate shared links between contemporary architects and those who serve as a historical vanguard. Given technological developments beyond anything the avant-gardes could have predicted, which have totally reshaped everything from the production of drawings to buildings and the notion of communication itself, why do architects continue to align their work with such a specific historical period and set of languages?

To start to investigate this idea, William Menking's article 'Superstudio as Super-Office' sheds light on the group's attempt to create a radical departure from the traditional architectural office. This was not only manifest in their drawn and theoretical work, but also in a desire to build buildings, which Menking sees as a means to subvert the discipline from within – a form of operation that resonates strongly with the work of contemporary practices such as raumlabor and Assemble.

In turn, Sarah Deyong emphasises how contemporary practice has drawn heavily from the avantgarde to develop an almost evangelical and 'hardcore' obsession with form. Expanding Postmodernism's desire to detach form from function, she argues that current trends see form as fluid, allowing for multiple interpretations and manipulations divorced from concerns about context, site and process.

When looking at contemporary practices' attempts at embodying the spirit of the avant-garde, it is important to register the influence of educational institutions, and none more so than the Architectural Association (AA) in London. During the 1970s and 1980s, the AA, headed by the enlightened Alvin Boyarsky, produced a new generation of experimental architects including Rem Koolhaas, Zaha Hadid and Nigel Coates. In his article 'Avant-Garde in the Age of Identity', Igor Marjanović looks at the very particular culture and innovation present in the school at this time, addressing how the notions of identity being expressed there informed its design output and are still helping to define educational practice today. Encapsulating both the stylistic and theoretical framework of this neo avant-garde is San Francisco-based NEMESTUDIO. In his interview with partner Neyran Turan, architect and historian Stylianos Giamarelos reveals the importance of this period in the studio's work, and how it has helped them to establish critical methodologies to address geographical and environmental issues in their own research and to explore new forms of architectural practice.

As a counterpoint to the celebration of, and reference to, groups such as Superstudio, architectural writer and commentator Mimi Zeiger warns of the dangers of historic reverence and reinvention without a critical purpose Architecture must be wary of retreating to an endless 'Groundhog Day' of historical loops that the discipline might currently be accused of engaging with. Instead, she argues, architecture must challenge its references from within, and

against other forms of practice and distinct political and social contexts.

The Spirit of the Avant-Garde

The spirit of the neo avant-gardes, like their forebears the Surrealists and Dadaists, was driven by a desire to develop polemics through and against existing cultural hegemonies, in their case the discipline of architecture. Their work took many forms, manifesting as drawings and texts, luscious graphic illustrations, self-published magazines, performances and small-scale installations and structures. The Information Age, however, has done much to change both how and in what context architectural imagery is now created and disseminated.

Andrew Kovacs explains how his constantly updated Archive of Affinities project, a collection of scanned and recorded images shared online, explores the meaning and purpose of contemporary relationships with historical architectural imagery within the context of social media platforms and the Internet, and how the construction of this digital archive has informed his development of new propositions and ways of working as a designer.
Perry Kulper's work exudes the spirit of the speculative, critical and the wonderful through an expansive set of detailed drawings and collages. In his contribution to this issue (pp xx–xx) he sets out to trace the historical and neo avant-garde influences behind his work, and discusses how the adoption of digital tools has allowed him to work free from concerns for such fundamentals as time and gravity.

The utopian can also be seen not simply as a vision of the future, but as an organising structure that binds the logic of a world together. As Neil Spiller argues, his work is not 'utopian' in the conventional sense (or perhaps in any sense). Yet within his 20-year Communicating Vessels project, which circumvents myths, impossible spaces and the looming presence of new technologies, we find links once again to those 'negative utopias' of the avant-garde in worlds where the protocols of architectural representation, technology and fantasy could be energised as a political vehicle.

Utopias and negative utopias of the avant-garde were also notable for addressing the environmental context of the day. In fact, as Sarah Dunn and Martin Felsen of UrbanLab show us , the relationship between utopia and ecological systems is a long one. From Charles Darwin to Kenzo Tange and their own proposals for Lake Michigan, the cultivation of landscape is a recurring theme in utopic architecture. This is made even more relevant when such endeavours involve the creation of utopias as systems allowing for change rather than fixed proposals, reflecting its importance as a design mechanism, and one that keenly corresponds to developments in computational technologies.

Formal Repetition

One of the key implications of looking back at the avantgarde is to understand the significance of formal tropes at risk of losing their agency due to the fluidity of modern imagery.

In a lively conversation with the guest-editors of
this issue, architect Sam Jacob and artist Pablo
Bronstein show the acts of repetition and re-enactment as
important ways of using architectural history in contemporary
design practice. This could be the adoption of a particular
character or working method, but also assuming a mindset, an
ethic for approaching architecture and form.
Avant-garde architects of the 1960s and 1970s challenged
the discipline by expanding the media field through
which architecture could be approached to clothing,
furniture, inflatables and comic books. In a comic specially
commissioned for this issue, Luis Miguel Lus
Arana and architectural cartoonist Klaus take us on a journey
through this expanded field, tracing paths from the neo avantgardes
to contemporary practitioners who continue to push
at the edges of what we might consider to be architecture.
Klaus's architectural caricatures reassemble the iconography
of the avant-garde into a new formal history.

Given their iconic status, Matthew Butcher
suggests we should develop more nuanced positions towards
these historical avant-garde projects, eschewing blank
reverence. His article examines his own design practice in
relation to the works of Superstudio and Raimund Abraham,
where the agency of both iconophilia and iconoclasm, the
love and destruction of images can be developed into a
holistic design practice. In his case, this relationship between
form and history is carried through into the design of specific
structures where distortions of avant-garde drawings become
encoded into material forms. This iconoclasm is productive,
generating an ongoing memorialisation rather than a

frozen and fixed history.

In many ways the work of avant-garde groups like Superstudio and Archizoom predicted the digital worlds we inhabit today. As Damjan Jovanovic points out , Superstudio's expansive grid is now not only a visual feedback loop (as mentioned by Mimi Zeiger), but is also the organising principle of our digital world. His discussion of his Supersurface computer-game application returns us to William Jovanovic's work, alongside that of the other contributors to this issue, reconnoitres how the avantgarde imagination might be (harnessed within new media that might one day become architecture and rupture the boundaries of the discipline.

Continuing Contradictions

In re-imagining the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, this AD issue brings together contributors who establish resonance between this period and the cutting-edge design experiments we are seeing today. This historical moment continues to fascinate because, as Burgellis and Orazi continue, 'the strength of those works lies precisely in their unabashed staging of the contradictions of those years, which are unfortunately the conflicts and contradictions of the present time and perhaps of the near future.'[5]
The consumerist society in which the avant-garde emerged – and in many cases directly critiqued – has expanded; the ecological crisis is reaching a zenith and social unrest has grown with the rise in populist politics.

Within this context it is both relevant and pressing to readdress questions of how architecture can once more align itself with a period that established, in the words of K Michael Hays, 'a moment in history when certain ways of practicing architecture still had philosophical aspirations'.[6] Re-imagining the Avant-Garde roots out the architects of today who hold on to this philosophical underpinning, whose work bounces back and forth between reference and reinvention, building the case that such practices define a significant moment in contemporary architectural discourse in which we can seek to cross temporal boundaries.

Notes

1. The term 'neo avant-garde' as described by Peter Burger refers to cultural production that utilised forms from the historical avant-garde. The term 'late avant-garde' was developed by K Michael Hays in order to separate his understanding of this period of architectural production from others. See Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis, MN), 1984, p 148, and K Michael Hays, Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 2010, pp 4–12.

2. Pino Brugellis and Manuel Orazi, 'Radicals Forever', in Pino Brugellis, Gianni Pettena and Alberto Salvadori (eds), Radical Utopias, Quodlibet Habitat (Rome), 2017, p 38.

3. Hida Heynen, Architecture and Modernity, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 1999, pp 4–5, 149–53.

4. Marco De Michelis, 'Aldo Rossi and Autonomous Architecture', in Terence Riley et al (eds), The Changing of the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawing from the Howard Gilman Collection, Museum of Modern Art (New York), 2002, p 90.

5. Brugellis and Orazi, op cit.

6. K Michael Hays, Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 2010, p 1.