Stalking the "Political" in Architectural Discourse:
Organic Intellectual Practice in the Late 1990s – Critical, Constructive, Affiliated

THOMAS A. DUTTON
Miami University

LIAN HURST MANN
Labor/Community Strategy Center

INTRODUCTION

As fascist ideology moves once again from veiled menace to bold contender throughout a newly re-capitalized Europe and across the United States, as the People's Republic of China offers neither democracy nor socialism, and as the political imagery of socialism seems unable to conjure a credible emancipatory project despite the proliferation of fronts of struggle, are examination of the role of culture in Left political organizing is urgent.

Today many architects attempt to theorize and practice a "political" architecture. Evidenced by the rising number of conferences on "critical practices" as well as an architectural media publishing "critical" subjects, it is now commonplace to acknowledge that architecture is political. For example, recent published venues concerning the relation between politics and architecture include: the debate about the social production of persona, initiated by Diane Ghirardo in *Progressive Architecture* (November 1994), with responses by Peter Eisenman and associates in *Progressive Architecture* (February 1995); the *Assemblage* 27 (August 1995) publication of "The Tulane Papers: The Politics of Contemporary Architectural Discourse;" and the ACSA International Conference held in 1997 in Berlin – the international meeting ground of famous architects of the past and present, the birthplace of both Marxism and Nazism, and the loci of new European East/West disintegration under the sledge hammer and crippled sickle of that grim reaper, free market capitalism – to discuss "Building as a Political Act."

We conceive of this paper as a work in progress as it stalks the "political" in recent architectural discourse, in two ways. First, we analyze discourses and practices claiming to be "political," paying particular attention to the rise of discursive radicalism and its political effects. Second, we hunt for the militancy of progressivism and seek to root political discourse in social history, not the academy.

We search for the political from our particular vantage points. Our recent book *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices'* is concerned with the global transformations of the political economy, culture, and more pointedly, the rise of discursive hegemony in intellectual discourse. It attempts to coalesce the strategies of feminism, critical theory, racial and ethnic studies, cultural studies, deconstruction, and environmentalism in order to rebuild (not redeem) the social project of architecture. In the effort to reformulate the role of architecture in society in order to further a progressive social transformation, our own location within contemporary debates about Marxism is clear.

Equally important, we theorize about political trends from our respective sites of social practice, that is, participating in the building of social movements in our respective geographies. We are partisans in urban confrontations that others among us seek to neutralize rather than engage.

Since 1981 Tom has worked closely with community groups in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine community to advance plans for physical and social rejuvenation. A predominately low/moderate income neighborhood, adjacent to the central business district and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, this community has all the consequences one would expect of a "run-down" community. But, the community is organized: approximately twelve progressive groups based in social service, community education, landlord/tenant relations, religion, and affordable housing development are linked into what is known as The People's Movement. The Movement is constantly under attack as it addresses gentrification, displacement, homelessness, housing abandonment, CBD expansion, the neglect of absentee landlords, the disregard of some city planners and officials, a vast swelling nihilism in the general population, and the wholesale sell-out of groups such as the Urban Land Institute. This community must fight the aggressive plans of ULI architects and planners while soliciting the help of supportive design professionals to save and revitalize their homes.

Lian is a founding member of the Labor/Community Strategy Center (LCSC) in Los Angeles. The LCSC is a nine

year-old, multiracial, predominantly people of color social justice "think-tank/act-tank" that develops policy around critical issues that affect low-income people, workers, and people of color, initiates social equity campaigns in Los Angeles County, and facilitates the creation of mass membership organizations to carry out these campaigns, most recently the campaign for transportation equity that launched the Bus Riders Union and enabled its success in the civil rights lawsuit Labor Community Strategy Center v. Metropolitan Transit Authority. The Consent Decree not only cuts fares, but also secures and expands the bus transportation infrastructure of the county region and places the union in a Joint Working Group with the MTA. The changes will impact the urban fabric of the city in ways we cannot yet imagine. Given the great variety of cultures and languages of its scholars and organizers, its in-house students and nationwide readers, and the regional communities it addresses, the think-act tank devotes considerable resources to experimenting with the power of art and culture for community education and organizing, including the development of multilingual programs, productions. publications, and visual arts. Like the People's Movement in Over-the-Rhine, the Strategy Center must confront design professionals who lobby for rail contracts while building constructive relationships with designers and artists allied with the bus riders.

Our posture here is polemical; because it is in the arena of academic discourse that the term "political" is so vulgarized and abused that we hardly recognize it. But it is also polemical because of the stakes involved today in the communities in which we work. In this light, we attempt to "speak truth to power" as Edward Said challenges progressive intellectuals to do.[2] We are both architects and academics who theorize, teach, and write about form-making as political practice. Within the context of the international cross-discipline dialogue about the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of intellectuals, we each conceive of our own work as affiliated, critical, and constructive.

THE CONFLATION OF POLITICS AND FORM

In Progressive Architecture, Diane Ghirardo provocatively dissected the social production of Peter Eisenman. He responded along with seventeen others. Ghirardo's strength was her focus on the political economy of the relations of production in the architecture industry, a vantage point desperately lacking in our discourse and one from which a critique of Eisenman's interventions can easily be made. Eisenman's counter was to pose the question: can form be defined politically, or conversely, can form be autonomous? In answer to this question, near unilateral agreement emerged among Eisenman's chosen respondents. Jennifer Bloomer wrote "that almost every human act has political dimensions," and Mark Wigley chimed "There is no formalism without a certain politics." To support the view of the inescapable link between form and politics, many respondents cautioned against the "questionable [western] philosophical tradi-

tion that separates form from content," or "the bourgeois incapacity to think in other than the most compartmentalized and undialectical categories."

We agree with these comments. But when we read deeper we found something disturbing. What worries us is that the desire to dissolve what is called "the tedious opposition between theory and practice" produces a conflation of form and politics into one indistinguishable entity. We believe it still important to maintain an analytical distance between form and politics, to have them constitute a particular dialectical interrelationship, not an identity. Failure to distinguish leads to false assumptions, for example, that radical form constitutes a radical politics. Thus, we argue, yes, form is always political, it has political effects and consequences, but this does not automatically mean that a focus on "disturbing" form yields social change or even a concern for social issues.

The relationship between politics and form can only be understood through conscious, explicit theorizing. We found little of this when we combed through the PA responses. Indeed, most seem content to leave the matter at that most banal of levels, that form and politics are related: Period, end of discussion. Not to go beyond this and to ask what kind of politics are worth the struggle and how form contributes to a transformative social project is to never surpass the level of liberal humanism, regardless of the posthumanist rhetoric. For us, the issue is not whether form is political, but what specific politics are being subscribed to and actually produced through formal interventions in practical political terrains.

A handful did assert architecture's responsibility to rethink the political. For example, John Rajchman suggested that architectural thought should direct itself to a "radical-democratic conception of the political" and Hays proposed that formalism should be "grasped as a properly political anticipation of new social relations, against and beyond the limits of our present ways of life." Having said this, however, Hays pulled his punches when it came to articulating the actual substance of his "anticipations." We always find it curious that in calls to rethink the political there is no reference to the need for architecture to link with progressive social and political movements, which could invigorate the intellectual life of architecture's self-identified theorists of the "political." Is Hays advancing a progressive politics? If so, then the question becomes more interesting: What theories of form-making make it possible to "think the social relations" of an anti-Fascist, anti-capitalist internationalist social movement at this moment in history?

THE CONFLATION OF THE CRITIQUE OF ARCHITECTURE AND THE CRITIQUE OF SOCIETY

We hoped to find this question addressed in a rethinking of the political at the Tulane retreat of the Assemblage editorial board. Published in Assemblage as "The Tulane Papers: The Politics of Contemporary Architectural Discourse," the exchange responded to the question posed by Catherine

Ingraham: what is the political dimension of scholarly work in architecture? No surprise appeared illustrating actual engagement of these would-be scholars in the political life of cities, movements, or peoples. Yet the resultant political position of the discourse on architecture was reaffirmed. Acknowledging an inevitable linkage between architecture and politics, one group of theorists continued to misappropriate Althusser to argue for their concentration on the autonomous character of architectural ideology and the critical/ political nature of intellectual practices (as well as formal strategies) that undermine the dominant ideologies internal to architecture, forgetting that Althusser's concept was "relative autonomy." Another group advanced a practice (couched as a critique) of "ideological smoothness," accepting that architecture may indeed be 'determined in the last instance' by external forces; yet the determinant force is culture, in particular media, whereby even the weakest remnants of any actual economic structure are displaced. Hays, occupying the Left wing with his "vestigial Marxism" focused on questioning who is the audience of this new consensus? He described an audience in which "modes of cultural expression...have been blurred, in which high and low, hip and nerd, Left and Right, have all but lost their distinctions, in which...the mapping of the real becomes indistinguishable from the real itself. What is more," he continued, "'the loss of reality' that comes with this indistinguishability is something some of us have learned to like."[4]

In both cases, however, the stance of the "critical" architectural project was clear: to focus on formal strategies of negation against architectural humanism. Such strategies of negation can be construed as a resistance to bourgeois philosophy by means of the formal subversion of architecture's language as a foundational metaphor for the bourgeois philosophical order, but they in no way address the contradictions inherent in practice within capitalism or even the academy. In short, they fail to resist bourgeois social life by means of social praxis – this, unfortunately, is the political dimension of scholarly work that the Tulane conference sought to define.

THE CONFLATION OF DISCURSIVE RADICALISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Formal strategies of negation mirror disturbing trends in intellectual criticism generally. Much of the practice of intellectual criticism is enveloped in a language of radical resistance that legitimates its isolation from material action; it is a fervor mainly of the discursive realm. Called "textualization," this intellectual practice now constitutes a hegemony of discourse that eclipses social practice.

Edward Said raised alarms about the dangers of discursive hegemony long ago. Writing in the early 1980s in Hal Foster's The Anti-Aesthetic, Said criticized the tendency of "intellectual discourse existing solely within an academy that has left the extra-academic outside world to the new Right and to Reagan." Countering "cloistral seclusion from the inhospitable world of real politics," Said challenged intellectuals to

connect their "politically vigilant forms of interpretation to an ongoing political and social praxis. Short of making that connection, even the best-intentioned and the cleverest interpretive activity is bound to sink back into the murmur of mere prose."[5]

The retreat into discourse, where matters of politics are spun within language games not meant for those embroiled in daily struggle, captures precisely the current standing of the political within architecture. Of concern to us here is the industry of critical interrogation divorced from acts of critical construction in the social world. We fear that, given the social relations and institutional arrangements of this industry, the social project of architecture becomes restricted to discursive activity. Theorists are charmed by producing the concept of new relations rather than the actual relations themselves. And architecture is cut adrift from real, material efforts to change the world.

Herein lies the worst conceptual error-to reproduce the naiveté of modernism and to effect its "cardinal sin." As social theorist Fredric Jameson puts it: the cardinal sin is to "identify (or conflate) the political and the aesthetic, and to foresee a political and social transformation that is henceforth at one with the formal processes of architectural production itself."[6] Without any attempt to ground progressive political vision in the body politic and the struggles of social movements, such work becomes academic-anything becomes possible by the stroke of the pen. Without grounding, what results is an aesthetic produced out of strategies of negation internal to architecture, where theoretical and formal experimentation conceived in detached shadows serves a discursive radicalism that acts as a substitute for material acts of affiliation within contemporary political realities.

ARCHITECTURE AS AFFILIATED CRITICAL CONSTRUCTION

To summarize, the political valence of architectural theorizing today has: (1) conflated politics with form, and theory with practice, entailing an entirely too casual and ultimately too causal relationship that discourages architects and critics from being explicit about their politics and their relation to form-making; (2) shifted from a critique of society, that once did develop strategies for architecture's progressive social agency, to a critique of language that retreats from the inhumane forces of everyday life, a nonetheless profoundly social act, all in the name of the political; and (3) disconnected theorizing from concrete social action, which reifies an academic rather than an organic role for the intellectual, thereby rendering inconsequential any strategies to undermine the ideologies of architecture as a means to undermining capitalism.

Recognizing that rhe path forward cannot take us back to humanisms or modernisms already known, architecture's social project needs reconstructing. To the extent that it is critically transformed to seek radical societal change within the most advanced forms of modern capitalism, the social

project of architecture orients the practice of those who envision a future that is not a past.

This is the ground-plane from which our book *Reconstructing Architecture* seeks to coalesce a movement of those progressives among us who are specifically seeking to reconstruct architecture's social project. This work encompasses a wide spectrum of views, theories, and practices. But we share a common purpose: to examine the political economy of the profession and to join with all practitioners who are critical of architecture's alignment with the reactionary forces of our time in seeking a politically progressive future.

Hence, the kind of practice we are conceiving here we call *affiliated critical construction*. Key elements of this practice are: the intent to recoup both the social militancy and the self reflective substance of the term *critical* in the face of its widespread cooptation; the willingness to stand for a race, gender, and class politics in constructive resistance to the so-called "critical" theories now dominating the discourse of the academy and of architectural practice, which allow deconstructive means to serve destructive ends; and the commitment to link the practices of architecture with the activities of progressive social movements and political organizations in not only a self-consciously located but an explicitly *affiliated* practice.

In some ways, affiliated critical construction is akin to organic intellectual practice, in the Gramscian sense. For Gramsci, the concept of the organic intellectual functioned as a tentative answer to the question of developing revolutionary popular consciousness.[7] Gramsci's intellectuals were both leading and representative, as he understood theory to reach its greatest clarity when embodied in specific collective actions. His new type of intellectual could only be produced through the school of social movements for the purpose of political strategy. This grounding of the intellectual function within the organized struggles for social change is what makes the intellectual role "organic."

We follow the path of those many producers of material culture who have affiliated closely with political organizations and social movements, using art and architecture to organize and educate so as to effect social change. We strive for a critical and constructive practice of architecture that— based in culture critique — reorients subjectivities and affirms the oppositional cultures of social movements.

Obviously, beyond a polemic that speaks truth to power, our own objectives must be fulfilled in our own social practice. Obstacles to successful organic practice are at times overwhelming, making it difficult to get to the potential of an aesthetic practice that can advance any particular struggle. Yet, schooled as we are in the everyday life of the social movements in which we participate, we proceed with our work. In the near future, we hope to flesh out more precisely the challenges of this affiliated critical constructive practice.

NOTES

[1] Thomas A. Dutton and Lian Hurst Mann, eds. *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices Pedagogy and Cultural Practice Series* (Minneapolis, *MN:* University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[2] Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), p. 85.

[3] Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in *For Marx* (London: The Penguin Press, 1969), p. 87.

[4] K. Michael Hays, "Architecture Theory, Media, and the Question of Architecture," in *Assemblage 27, The Tulane Papers: The Politics of Contemporary Architectural Discourse, p. 44.*

[5] Edward Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, WA.: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 149, 158.

[6] Fredric Jameson, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology," in Joan Ockman, ed., *Architecture Criticism Ideology* (Princeton, *NJ.:* Princeton Architectural Press, 1985), pp. 71-72.

[7] Antonio Gramsci, "Problems of Marxism," *Selections from Political Writings* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 8.