# Aesthetics as Form of Politics

## Arets and Koolhaas Provide Architecture with New Impulses

*Roemer van Toorn*

Essay – May 1, 2006

**Contemporary architecture is seldom political. Either it withdraws from reality because of its introverted body of ideas or it uncritically embraces reality in all its heterogeneity. According to the architecture critic Roemer van Toorn, Wiel Arets's library and Rem Koolhaas's Casa-da-Música prove that it is indeed possible to develop what he calls a 'political aesthetics'.**

A fierce academic debate has broken out in America and Europe about so-called 'critical' architects who resist the status quo and post-critical architects who deploy 'projective practices' in an attempt to resolutely engage with capitalist society. Architects like Tadao Ando and John Pawson resist our contemporary consumer culture by creating minimal, symmetrical and abstract compositions, employing a limited palette of materials and eliminating decoration. The problem with 'critical architecture' – like that of Peter Eisenman, Liz Diller & Ricardo Scofidio or Daniel Libeskind – is that it closes itself off in an isolated world where the only criteria that count are those inherent in the form, beauty or truth of the medium. Architecture wants to be architecture and nothing else. These architects are following the philosopher Theodor Adorno's advice that, if the everyday world is corrupt, there is only one thing that aesthetic experience can do and that is to distance itself from reality so as to guarantee a pure aesthetic promise. The social function of art consists in having no function, as Adorno would say. Such a negation of reality is meant to arouse resistance and rebellion in the political field.

According to the architecture critics Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, we should no longer burn our fingers on 'critical architecture', but launch cool 'projective practices'.[1] Instead of letting fly at reality with a priori attitudes the way critical architecture does, projective practices analyse the facts in the hope that the micro-decisions taken during a project's creative process can transform a project in a very concrete and specific way.[2] The criterion here is a passion for extreme reality rather than a vision on reality. This architecture is driven not by an ideology, a presupposed idea, but by the data found in reality. The focus is hence on charting reality in the form of diagrams: ideology has been replaced by pragmatic actions. Being complicit within the system is not seen as a problem, then, but precisely as the only possible chance for success. A projective practice does not stand on the sideline, but right in the midst of mass culture, which we are all a part of and in which we find new possibilities anyway. A projective practice opts for direct involvement; it seeks contact with the user and prefers easy rather than difficult forms of communication. Textbooks or experts telling you how you should understand architecture are abhorred. It feels at home in the popular world of advertising and subcultures. Dogmas, established values and pompous stories are alien to it; it is open to sundry readings, as long as there is a rampant play of interpretations and debate.

## The Sixties

Projective practice is actually a typical 1960s movement. Like the theorist and hippy Gilles Deleuze and his colleague Felix Guattari, it abhors any form of totalitarianism. In accordance with this practice, the human mind and body may not be terrorized in any way at all by formal and institutional systems. It opts for open systems that are preferably in motion, experiments without preconceived norms. Any form of indoctrination, control or silencing has to be prevented. The dialectical logic of progress through opposition typical of the Modern Movement, which eliminated the past with its idea of a tabula rasa, is not its thing either. Linear processes holding out the promise of a definitive and pure truth have to be avoided. They all lead, after all, to totalitarianism.

Deleuze and Guattari propose instead a logic that takes the middle as its starting point, that operates through the middle, through a coming and going, concentrating on the in between, where the line (curve) prevails over the point. For this they use the image of the rhizome, the (non-hierarchical) rootstock of ferns, for example. Central to their theory is the optimistic reading of man as a positive, pleasure-seeking 'machine' capable of accomplishing the most positive connections possible in each unique situation. It is an appeal for active participation, a constant process of becoming without any form of discipline. Or, in the words of the Slovenian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek: '[T]he aim of Deleuze is to liberate the immanent force of Becoming from its self-enslavement to the order of Being.' [3] Man must be a producer of unpredictable creations, full of differences, intensities and permanent interaction, all the while embracing the reality of the virtuality of Being.

Various critiques of the work of Deleuze make mention of the fact that celebrating infinite differences does not guarantee liberation. Contemporary capitalism has bid farewell to totalizing standardization; digital capitalism has itself become Deleuzian. The carnival-like quality of daily life now ensures high profits through the permanent revolution of its own order. Instead of differentiating between what is or is not important, we are saddled with a plurality of lifestyles coexisting happily and comfortably.

In embracing heterogeneity and the infinite relationships that an intelligent system can generate – afraid of choosing a wrong direction, as modernism, communism and Maoism did at the time – fewer and fewer designers are daring to put one particular antagonism or guiding alternative above another. There is a danger that searching for difference or inciting the unpredictable is made into an absolute, with the potentiality of difference being interpreted as a fetish.

This critique applies to Deleuze's body of thought, but it is equally applicable to that of the supporters of projective practices. They too run the risk of producing nothing but advanced entertainment, precisely because they do not declare themselves openly for or against anything, except that they want to be self-organizing and interactive. The dilemma is that the once so progressive potential of the rhizome, the idea of heterogeneity – in contrast to what Deleuze and others were hoping – does not set people free in late capitalism but makes them actually dependent on the economically-correct rhizomatic system.

The problem with both critical architecture and projective practice is that both – each with its own aesthetics and method – generate consensus and hence in fact operate apolitically. [4] I shall return to this later.

## Fresh Conservatism

In projective practice, and in contemporary architecture, art, music, film as well as in theatre in general, this embrace of heterogeneity often does not escape what I once described as 'fresh conservatism'. [5] Both the philosopher Jacques Rancière and I have referred to the apolitical conflicts that bring about a lot of heterogeneous combinations. [6] One way of bringing together heterogeneous elements as antagonistic elements is the joke. But the joke, as in the *Basketbar* by nl-architecten or *Heerlijkheid Hoogvliet* by the fat group of architects, reveals no secret. The dialectic tension between the elements is reduced to a subversive game, as in the Benetton ads.

A second way is to bring together heterogeneous elements in a collection, whereby all the parts exist next to each with no hierarchical distinction. The collection is an attempt at charting the details of our collective world and its history. The equality of all the parts – political writings, economic facts, photographs, advertising, architecture, journalism, interviews, and so forth – in OMA / AMO's *Content Catalogue* or the Dutch pavilion in Hannover by MVRDV architects, for example, testifies to such a permissive heterogeneity. But this collection is not capable of inciting a conflict that unlocks a secret or new possibilities. Nor does it deal critically with the chance relations that arise between the different parts. No position is assumed, the arrangement of the material is not based on a particular directionality guiding thought or way of acting. There is no directionality conducted from a chosen point of view.

Thirdly, we have dialogue without direction; if the concept just stimulates discussion then everything is fine. A lot of new architecture and art is relational: it consists in generating interpersonal experiences and turns the visitor into a conversation partner, an active participant. This new form of art does not try to bring about contact with the user or beholder via a passive experience, but via active participation. It's no longer a question of objects, but of situations that cause new forms of relations to arise. Interactivity as a goal without the initiator taking the responsibility for choosing a position. Such an approach can be seen in the work of nox architects (Lars Spuybroek), an eloquent example being the D-Tower in Doetinchem made in collaboration with the artist Q.S. Serafijn.

The fourth and final aspect of fresh conservatism that I would like to talk about is mystery. By this I don't mean an enigmatic mystery, a form of mysticism or trauma with a confrontational effect, but mystery as a familiar strangeness or affirmative analogy, like the Schaulager Museum in Basle designed by Herzog and De Meuron, a prototypical house as drawn by a child. Here again we discover attention to complex beauty, while heterogeneous elements are unnecessarily combined into an antagonism.

In my view, these four heterogeneous ways of working create a new form of consensus. Every collective situation is objectified and therefore no longer makes a difference, or lends itself to a polemic about our controversial reality. I think we have lost sight of the fact that a system replete with heterogeneity can also raise certain urgent matters without consensus, without already wanting or being able to provide the ultimate answer. What has happened to those experiments in which heterogeneous conflicts do have a guiding effect and a progressive directionality?

## A Form that Thinks

For the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, cinema is a form that thinks. In contrast to television that only shows what is already defined. According to Godard, there is even 'nothing to see any longer: neither reality nor image'. [7] People have forgotten how to look, so, Godard argues, as makers we have to hand the public a key so they can start seeing again. The method that Godard uses for this is the coexistence of juxtapositions – fascination and aversion, emptiness and love, freedom and consumption. These interrelated concepts are

meant to challenge the viewer to establish new connections. They have to offer the viewer a key to actively interpret image and text. 'One should not create a world, but the prospects of a world,' says Godard. For him, then, the images are not what they are. The visible world is haunted by 'the prospects of another world . . . The possibility of a world.' Images can therefore not be called beautiful in terms of beauty, stability or perfection, but precisely in terms of transparency, fragility and potentiality. What Godard's work is essentially about is that space can be created for establishing connections in an infinite number of possible ways. It is not a question of the things themselves (the form) but of what happens between and through these things. This way of thinking also underlines Wiel Arets's university library on the Uithof in Utrecht and Rem Koolhaas's Casa-da-Música in Porto. These buildings are characterized by a spatial typology making for neighbourliness. All sorts of connections become possible in an open and unforced way, without any form of forced steering. The consequences of such a position in architecture are not to be sneered at. For architecture this means that you have to design in terms of plans and sections, that form and programme, elevation and interior, route (infrastructure) and volume, material and colour, seeing and feeling, rationality and subjectivity, representation and presentation, experience and object, the specific situation and universal principles, should not be conceived separately. What this architecture revolves around is not the object itself but the entirety of relations or ensembles.

**Building Brecht**

But in order to answer the question as to how you can use heterogeneous conflicts to create possibilities for another world and can activate freedom in use, it is illuminating to take a look at the ideas of Bertold Brecht. Brecht once said, 'Would it not be easier for the government to dissolve the people and elect another?' What he meant was that in the theatre it's a question of creating a different public. In order to be able to change ingrained habits it is essential to take up an external (and often also extreme) position. It is not enough to embrace the ordinary, the known, the everyday. Brecht does this by deploying various techniques of alienation. In order to nevertheless create a free space for the audience to reflect, he deemed it advisable to build in a certain distance. One of the techniques he uses is the 'free, indirect style' that keeps interrupting the plot of the story with asides, commentaries and other digressions. In contrast to classical drama, the narrative in Brecht's epic theatre does not develop linearly, but in a discontinuous and fragmented manner. This is also the reason why it has no climax or catharsis.

The aesthetic and spatial structures of the buildings by Koolhaas and Arets have no climax or catharsis either. They do not want to prescribe anything. Neither building can be classified in any way by the spectator – they are strange and enigmatic buildings and yet everything functions as usual. It is not for nothing that in the Casa-da-Música in Porto we find all sorts of traces of the ordinary, the recognizably everyday, like the black and white tiles, the classical furniture in a Delft blue setting, a view across the city in the concert hall and many playful catwalks which are fantastic for parading over. That which we simply are, but actually never noticed in all its 'ordinariness', suddenly becomes visible, without our existence being tripped up the way it is in critical architecture. At the same time it has an alienating effect. It's almost as though the spectator has landed in a detective story where every random fact or object is a clue to a possible murder. The most ordinary things suddenly become signs, and each sign can lead to another sign, because of the desire to see and to know what is going on.

This psychoanalysis of seeing, as Walter Benjamin calls it in relation to film, also holds good for the Casa-da-Música and the library. In the library, for example, everyone is free to choose where he or she wants to sit: in small, private study cabins, on high open areas or in modest collective spaces. The architect does not explain how you should behave, but creates possibilities and encourages different usages. The interior of Arets's library is coloured black and it is this, rather than the non-hierarchically arranged space, that

challenges the user. Even more so than in Arets's library, a complex system of relations is created in the Casa-da-Música, which ingeniously interact with, influence and constantly interrogate one another.

### Aesthetics as a Form of Politics

In the design methodology of Arets and Koolhaas, autonomy is not an aim in itself, as in critical architecture, but a method of dislocating commonplace clichés without wanting to destroy them. Reality can thus be experienced in a different way, consciously taking into account its plural quality. Everything in this architecture strikes one as familiar, but at the same time everything is completely different and the user becomes aware of new paths and possibilities. The term that Brecht used for this procedure was *umfunctionierung* (re-functioning): [8] the deployment of autonomy creates a free space between what is and what is possible.

This exchange between critical architecture's idea of autonomy and the everyday experiences and sensations of projective practice could be called a third position in aesthetics. If we weave together these two different domains then we can no longer speak of a consensus; instead there arises a high degree of what Jacques Rancière calls 'dissensus'. Consensus is a matter for the police, says Rancière, since it's a question of drawing up and maintaining rules and normalizing situations that have gotten out of hand as quickly as possible. Dissensus, on the other hand, is a political affair in which everyone is challenged to constantly position themselves in the arena of quotidian experience. The quality of such an antagonistic constellation consists in coalitions and antithetical terms, in a 'politics of aesthetics', precisely as described by Rancière. Architecture cannot, of course, conduct parliamentary politics. Spatial constellations can deliver no advice on how to vote or convey messages about social and political problems. Architecture is political precisely because of the distance it takes from these functions. Architecture can also be political in the way in which, as a space-time sensorium, it organizes being together or apart, and the way it defines outside or inside. Architecture is political in the manner in which it makes reality visible by means of its own aesthetic syntax, and giving it a direction. Architecture influences the sensorium of being, feeling, hearing and speaking that determines the atmosphere and experience of a spatial constellation. This aesthetics as a form of politics is realized in a continuous process of transgressing borders, as applied by Brecht in his Epic Theatre or in the films of Godard. The spectator's pathetic-emotional perception is broken up by a montage of contradictions, thereby enabling the spectator to fulfil, in a detached, self-reflective way, a process of what Brecht calls 'permanent education'. The primary procedure of aesthetics as a form of politics consists in the creation of possible encounters, which lead in their turn to a conflict between heterogeneous elements. This conflict can cause ruptures in our perception and reveal secret connections and new possibilities pertaining to everyday reality. In architecture, aesthetics as a form of politics is an order of dissensus which is not so much aimed at breaking the spell of reality, as in critical architecture, but at creating a free space between what we are accustomed to and what is possible. Object and form, then, are never finished, but keep generating other interpretations. The autonomous strength of this architectural concept provokes a 'dialogical transformation', or, as Godard typified it, 'a form that thinks'. It's not for nothing that Arets and Koolhaas are charmed by William Blake's Proverbs of Hell, in which he announced 'Opposition is True Friendship', and 'Without Contraries Is No Progression'.

## Directionality

Surfing the waves of late-capitalism is not sufficient to achieve alternatives, not even if we play the heterogeneous contradictions against each other. That which is suppressed – what remains a secret – has to come to the surface and preferably call forth progressive solutions. This means that architects and clients must not neglect their social task. Architecture also implies developing progressive programmes. Purely projective projects generate – as explained above – heterogeneous conflicts that result in consensus. In fresh conservative works the cliché is not questioned or transformed, but confirmed, albeit in a reflective and subversive way.

In Arets's library and Koolhaas's Casa-da-Música consensus is avoided. The dialogical transformations of Arets's and Koolhaas's buildings do something different: while sundry interpretations are possible, collide with each other, come to terms with or oppose one another, there is also an investment in what you could call a communal and public direction. Instead of falling apart in an endless cacophony of voices, both buildings reinvent the collective. Both the library and the Casa-da-Música invest in the creation of a public space. In both buildings the complex route through the space is held together by a strong urban form and an internal collective space: in the library it's the large communal hall with its many belvederes and in the Casa-da-Música it's a question of the communal concert hall, the square on which the meteorite has landed and the view of the city. Instead of representing the king or the people, these buildings contribute to the invention of a people.

Aesthetics as a form of politics does exist. Arets's university library and Koolhaas's Casa-da-Música offer exemplary starting points for further developing this other (third) political route – which can learn from both critical architecture and projective practice. In my opinion, these buildings derive their sensibility from the field of tension evoked by the autonomous in direct contact with the everyday environment. While the buildings manifest themselves autonomously in architectural terms, they invest in the everyday space-time sensorium. This apparently paradoxical combination – of aloofness with regard to the everyday and an embrace of the ordinary – produces inspiring conflicts and reinvents the public. Whereas critical and post-critical projective architecture generate consensus, Arets and Koolhaas are trying to create a positive dissensus in their buildings, on the basis of an unsolvable conflict. In this sense their buildings are never finished.

**Roemer van Toorn** is head of Projective Theory at the Berlage Institute, PhD candidate (Berlage Chair) and research assistant at the DSD Delft University of Technology.

## Footnotes

1. For more information on 'post-critical' see: George Baird, '"Criticality" and Its Discontents' and Roemer van Toorn, 'No More Dreams?', *Harvard Design Magazine* 21, 2004; Sanford Kwinter, 'Who is Afraid of Formalism?', *ANY* 7 / 8, 1994; 'Equipping the Architect for Today's Society: the Berlage Institute in the Educational Landscape' (dialogue between Wiel Arets, Alejandro Zaero-Polo and Roemer van Toorn); Stan Allen, 'Revising Our Expertise', Sylvia Lavin, 'In a Contemporary Mood', and Michael Speaks, 'Design Intelligence', *Hunch*, 6 / 7, 2003; Jeffrey Kipnis, 'On the Wild Side' (1999), in*:* Farshid Moussavi, Alejandro Zaera-Polo, et al (eds.), *Phylogenesis, foa's ark: foreign office architects* (Barcelona: Actar Editorial, 2004). For a strong debate on criticism among Hal Foster, Michael Speaks, Michael Hays, Sanford Kwinter and Felicity Scott see: *Praxis: Journal of Writing and Building 5: Architecture after Capitalism, 2003*.
2. Why the word projective? 'Because it includes the term project Other Moods of Modernisms', *Perspecta 33 Mining Autonomy: The Yale Architectural Journal*, 2002.
3. Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies; Deleuze and Consequences* (New York, Routledge, 2004).
4. See also my essay 'No More Dreams?', *Harvard Design Magazine* 21, 2004. A shorter version can also be found in *Architectuur in Nederland, Jaarboek 2003-04* (Rotterdam, NAi Publishers, 2004).
5. Roemer van Toorn, 'Fresh Conservatism, Landscapes of Normality', *Quaderns Re-active* 219, Barcelona, 1998.
6. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (New York, Continuum, 2004).
7. Jean-Luc Godard in conversation with Youssef Ishaghpour, in: *Cinema: The Archaeology of Film and the Memory of A Century* (New York, Berg, 2005).
8. Brecht's theatre created this strategy of feeling at home and alienation within a single system as a form of liberation with the aid of his *Gestus* method. In contrast to Method acting – where the actor becomes the person he or she is playing – Brecht demanded of his actors that they should always remain themselves. Like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Brecht preferred to work with amateurs, since in that way the tension between fiction and reality can be preserved. A good actor does not put himself in the character's shoes but colours the person he plays with his own personality. The actor thus tells as much about himself than about the character. The *Gestus* produces through this 'inter-personality' a constant dialogue or intermediality that forces the spectator to look further than the beguilement of Method acting. This method of the *Gestus* can be seen on many levels in the work of Koolhaas in particular.

## Tags

Aesthetics, Architecture, Design

This text was downloaded on November 5, 2026 from
*Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*
onlineopen.org/aesthetics-as-form-of-politics