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Dispersion of Stylistic Modernisms: Hundred Years of Plasticity

(Case study of Venice Architectural Biennale 2014)

Abstract | This paper will give an interpretation of lasting, wavering state of modernity in the perspective of architectural thought and practice. Looking at contemporaneity as a phenomenon related to the status of aesthetics, the paper will try to outline an ongoing spin of modernity by viewing the present aspirations of architectural design that are being contradicted by the time itself.

According to Marshall Berman's study, the experience of modernity can be divided into three phases, whereby the latest, which includes the twentieth century, evinces the loss of the initial steam. As far as he sees, modernity has forwent a great deal of *its capacity to organize and give meaning to people's lives*: - *As results of all this we find ourselves today in the mist of modern age that has lost touch with the roots of its own modernity*. Thirty years after Berman's observation, Zygmunt Bauman reaffirms the unstable nature of modernity by comparing the processes inside the cultural systems up to the very end of the past century. Pointing out that modernism is an unfinished project he introduces the term *late modernity* in order to imprint the development of global modernity in the circumstances inherent to the society of today. Since the mid-1990s, the fixed, *hardware modernisms* should have turned into more dynamic, *software* state, emphasizing the generally heightened sense of uncertainty and ambivalence.

From the point of view of the present moment, through this paper we will prove that uncertainty of consecutive modernisms evinces today in the notion of ambivalence; architecturally speaking, the appearances of contingency take us to the physical environment where the vivid *experience of modernity* is incessantly being confronted with the ontological call for the truth. The paper will argue that in-between this inner confrontation of modernisms and the modernistic urge for representation (of the solid body-idea of modernity) dissolution of consecutive modernisms appears. Such emergence of (disperse) reality is referred to as the aspect of *plasticity* of modernism.

Through the case of Venice Architecture Biennale 2014, latest event acquainted on the global scale, the paper will discuss the mechanism of appearance and exposure of plasticity in display of one hundred years of architectural idealism. Stressing the consistent, prevailing exclusivity of the architectural practices, the observation reaches the aesthetic roots of plasticity of modernism. It brings into the focus the modernistic rupture with *the roots of its own modernity*, connecting its totality of aesthetic paradigm with the present-day exceptional and uncommunicative status of the architectural object. Nevertheless, inside the mechanism of expose, the appearances and objects set free from totality, becoming agency of plasticity and unbound architectural background.

Key words | *diffusion, dynamic, time, uncertainty, space, idealism, representation*

1. ONTOLOGICAL CALL FOR THE TRUTH AND INNER SOUL OF ARCHITECTURE

The history of modernism, with all the differences that were visible on the horizon of the last century, remains largely defined by the same tendency for embodiment of which the paradigmatic model is the ambition of Le Corbusier. It is the model of philosophical understanding of the practice – the Le Corbusieran instance of the truth from *Toward an Architecture*¹ - which abolishes the possibility of any different relation than the one by which the object is taken by the subject. Recognizing the importance of the ontological root of the identity of form, the study opens philosophical and architectural conditions to perceive the polarities inside the ambivalent nature of modernity.

Relying on critical thinking of Theodor Adorno and his step in the direction of the disjunction of subjectivity,² we are seeking for the wider scope of relations within the modernist concept of the form. First we need to recognize a form as an external aspect of architectural thought, and to define it as the appearance in which the projection of architecture is manifested to the world. It is important to observe that this appearance is by itself an architectural notion, in the sense that it is subjectively structured. As an outcome of the reflective aesthetic procedure, the form represents a singular and determined order that becomes the modality of principal modernist relations as is the relation between the subject and the object. The abstract quality of form introduces a subjective distance from a particular object and an immediate action; thus, it subdues the notion of the object into the idea of the subject and further, into the unique, all-pervading, synthesizing principle. According to Adorno, the thinking of the form represents the thinking of an identity, as long as it is based on the method of abstraction: the principle of abstraction implicitly repeals the categorical distinction between the concept and the phenomenon, or - the shape and the thing.³

By applying of the form, the theory of architecture sets itself towards what it wants to acquire, allowing the subject to take up the comfortable position - always to meet the embodied forms of conceptions. Noting that discursive logic always works in favour to subject's self-identification of prior materialized concepts, Adorno emphasizes how it remains blind for the costs of the usurpation of meaning it takes - reshaping as well the things that are not reducible to concepts.⁴ Reflection of the form carries out the philosophical, idealistic absorption, tending to reduce all of the reality into one – into the style, the principle, the concept or the figure – therefore, always into the unifying moment of the subject.⁵ The metaphysical requirement of the modernist architectural form indicates the symbolic separation from the object. It pursues the identity from *non-identical, the meditations from downright immediate* – and thus

symbolizes the modernist subordination of history, nature or whatever else would resist the concept.⁶ As Adorno observes, *what moves ontology to carry out the ideological procedure - the reconciliation in the spirit, is that the real reconciliation failed. Historic contingency and the concept are the more mercilessly antagonistic the more solidly they are entwined.*⁷

By this insight into the polarities of modernisms from the point of view of Adorno's modern philosophy of the subject, we should open the contradictions of contemporary architecture, seeing it as a thought and a practice that goes beyond the identical forms by engaging forms in the time – in non-identical perspective of their dissolution. This kind of dissolution, in contemporary relation to the aesthetical processes of modernism, we formulate as the *condition of plasticity*.

2. DISSOLUTION OF CONSECUTIVE MODERNISMS

Decisive *concern* of the twentieth century modernism is perceived, not in the homogeneity of its philosophical and practical conceptions but in their attitude towards the multitudinous and heterogeneous compositions. Moreover, we can say, relating to Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, that these conceptions have implemented the discursive violence against the contingencies of the object.⁸

The ranking in architecture had the older and more far-reaching sense of contingency which included the possibility of external interruptions.⁹ Nevertheless, this sense of relative orders was nullified with modernistic rupture and at the same time paradoxically reaffirmed under the single overall principle - the unity (of modern style) and the totality (of its formal logic). Modernistic order represents the tangible precision - the ideal of phenomenological transparency, the mathematical measure of the nature and the structural correctness of the space plan. Inevitable modernism's attribute of logic (order) always evinces as form of self-reflection in the present, since the modernistic liberation of the aesthetic resources has determined the comprehensive architectural positions. By this, the prevailing architectural thought is oriented back, towards the credible moment of subjective reflection.

Until the end of the first era of globalization (which started around 1910, marked out with the appearance of the futurist movement and the famous lecture of Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime*)¹⁰ the modernization in art and architecture held up the instability of individual aesthetical / philosophical self-determinations, which were based on the conceptual opposites of the constitutive pairs: *the form and the formlessness, the construction and the deconstruction,*

*the subject and the object as well as the identity and the other.*¹¹ It was not before the modernistic manifestos of early twentieth century that dialectical contradictions of modernity were resolved in favour of the conceptual certainty of the world. Determined by this choice, the architecture had lost the role that it established throughout the history – to mediate the external forces which powers recurrently shaped and disintegrated it. The autonomy of the architectural form has outlined the twentieth century discipline by producing the great rhetorical paradigms, namely modernism, post-modernism and super-modernism.

Italian thinker Gianni Vattimo observes - *The decisive fact for the transition from the aesthetic explosion that formed the historical avant-garde movements (movements which see the death of art as the abolition of aesthetical borders in the direction of a metaphysical or a historical-political scope of the work) to the explosion that occurs in the midst of neo-avant-gardism is the touch with the technology in terms that was emphasized by Walter Benjamin in his discussion from the year 1936, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.'* *The exodus of art outside the institutional frameworks is no longer exclusively, and not even primarily, linked with the metaphysical or revolutionary-utopian existence. It is associated with the advent of new technology which actually allows, and even defines, a form of generalization of the aesthetics.*¹²

Facing the end of the past century, Vattimo concludes that the aesthetical sphere is identified with the sphere of the new media that contribute to the creation, the establishment and the intensification of the common language in the social sphere. The mass media are not in the service of the masses but they become the (aesthetical) resources of the masses – since they establish the masses as such - as a public sphere of common thoughts, tastes and feelings. He further argues that this function, defined as *the organization of consensus*, is highly aesthetical, at least in one of its principal meanings - not in sensation that subject experiences within the object, but in one that he experiences within the other, coming from the ascertainment of his fitting into a group, or an event united by the shared ability to estimate and enjoy the beautiful.¹³

In the case of Adorno's negative aesthetics, followed (in architectural theory) by writings of Bernard Tschumi, the criterion by which the form (namely, the recognition of the object) is evaluated, corresponds to its level of ability of negation. According to Vattimo's observations, the aporetic vision of architectural design remains vital in regard to its existential ideas: to reintegrate itself and resist the forces of aesthetical assimilation. Nevertheless, it does not fully respond to elusiveness of the present sense of modernity which induces a dissolving perception

of the architectural, as well as the artistic form of expression. Vattimo stresses that *the world of authentic and integrated human experience is no longer (or not yet) realistic*.¹⁴

This kind of feeling seems to be built-in into the modern scenery, although it consistently doesn't fit its representations, inasmuch as we can say that the actuality of the sum of modernist reflections differs a great deal from the totality of aesthetic conceptions that preceded them. According to Marshall Berman's study from the late 1970s, published in 1982, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*,¹⁵ the overall experience of modernity could be divided into three phases, whereby the latest, which included the twentieth century, evinced the loss of the initial steam. As far as he saw, modernity renounced a great deal of *its capacity to organize and give meaning to people's lives*. He argued that, as the result of all this, the post-industrial world found itself *in the mist of modern age that had lost touch with the roots of its own modernity* -

*The volatile atmosphere of the 1960s generated a large and vital body of thought and controversy over the ultimate meaning of modernity. Much of the most interesting of this thought revolved around the nature of modernism. Modernism in the 1960s can be roughly divided into three tendencies, based on attitudes towards modern life as a whole: affirmative, negative and withdrawn. This division may sound crude, but recent attitudes toward modernity have in fact tended to be cruder and simpler, less subtle and dialectical than those of a century ago.*¹⁶

Berman was among a few thinkers of the time who reflected the gap between the phenomena and the myth - the problem, *especially acute* for consecutive modernism, for which he argued was *foreclosed or unfriendly to change* - rather it sought *one colossal change and then no more*, and which was indicatively represented by Le Corbusier's ambition to advance the ideal architectural form for embodiment of the new aesthetical resources.

3. EXPOSURE AND APPEARANCE OF PLASTICITY IN DISPLAY OF ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF ARCHITECTURAL IDEALISM

Turning-over motive of the 'End of History' for the first time appears at the momentum of industrial revolution and technical modernity before modernism. It followed the great structural engineering achievements for which the emblematic figure is the building of The Crystal Palace, in 1851.¹⁷ As Peter Sloterdijk notices, *with its construction, the principle of interiority crossed a critical threshold: from then on, it signified neither the bourgeois or aristocratic dwelling, nor its projection into the sphere of urban shopping arcades. Rather, it began to*

transpose the outside world as a whole into a magical immanence transfigured by luxury and cosmopolitanism. Here Sloterdijk refers to the intense experience of an early modernity, aroused by the acceleration of time and the shrinking of global distance. It is a phenomenon of the spread of perception, individual and shared on a global level, accompanied by large cultural, social and economic shift that empowered international exchange. In the light of this kind of intensifying global communication, The Great World Exhibitions and Venice Art Biennale emerged as a form of comprehension of the global. In relation to this, we may conclude that eighty years were needed to architecture to gain the position to reflect itself as subject. As Brett Steele notices in preface of the book *Architecture on Display: on the History of the Venice Biennale of Architecture - The history of successive biennales isn't just its register, as if a windsock, or architectural fashion, taste or interest. (By this stage) the biennale has itself become a kind of living record – of architecture's own contemporary struggle as a form of cultural production on the one hand, and that production on (and not only of) display on the other. Seeing these dual tendencies as commensurate and equal, or a simply parallel and opposed, is simply too crude a (dialectical) view of knowledge (let alone architectural knowledge) today.*¹⁸

The Venice Architecture Biennale 2014, the latest event acquainted on the global scale, once more revealed this struggle through the mechanism of exposure. This exposure always simultaneously deforms initial intentions into something else. It is a result of multiply reflections, repeating through time and distorting into the plasticity of meanings. Director of 2014 Biennale, Paolo Baratta concludes - *While information gains new tools and updating becomes simpler, it is those dangers of conformity and indifference that preoccupy us; indifference and conformity lead to passiveness and even extinguish the desire for art and architecture. A Biennale exhibition has the duty to oppose this; it has to know how to trip up this move towards conformity and revitalize those desires. Rediscovering 'points' of reference to better express those desires is one of the ambitions of the present research, which is of course addressed to the professionals but looks to the general public above all.* With these intentions, the form (i.e. the object) is losing the metaphysical character and becoming more disposable. What really appears is a reflection of self reflection, created both, by the inherent need (of architecture as discipline) to expose, and an in-forced effort to display, in this case, one hundred years of architectural desire for progress.

By placing a topic *Absorbing Modernity 1914–2014*¹⁹ Rem Koolhaas embodies the power to totalise and unite last hundred years of modernity into the one synthesizing concept inside institution of Venice Biennale. Rem Koolhaas describes Fundamentals as an exhibition that consists of three main components, where the largest one bears the title *Absorbing Modernity*

1914-2014. For the first time according to Koolhaas, respond to a single theme...65 countries – in the Giardini, at the Arsenale and elsewhere in the city – examine key moments from a century of modernization. Together, the presentations start to reveal as Koolhaas claims how diverse material cultures and political environments transformed a generic modernity into a specific one. Participating countries show, each in their own way, a radical splintering of modernities in a century where the homogenizing process of globalization appeared to be the master narrative. Koolhaas attempts to perform absorption as tool for appropriation of universality and singularity at the same time. This kind of scenery seems to be built-in in the claim about the consistent, prevailing exclusivity of the position of architecture-architect (regarding mutual dependents of theory and practice).

Parallel to this, there is also a reverse position of the subject, opening possibility of contingency. Revealed contingency triggers the viewer's appropriation of the situation, by this exceeding the expected frame, making accessible the comprehension of always new-distorted perception of the existence (being) of the form. According to Adorno: *The ambiguity of the Greek words for 'being' — an ambiguity that dates back to the Ionians' failure to distinguish between materials, principles, and the pure essence— is not listed as a defect but as original superiority. Its mission is to heal the concept 'Being' of the wound of its conceptuality, of the split between thoughts and their content.*²⁰

Therefore, the imposing of a time frame always brings us again into modernistic rupture, overcoming totality of aesthetical paradigm within the present-day exceptional and uncommunicative status of the architectural object.

¹ *Toward an Architecture - Vers une architecture*, translated into English as *Toward an Architecture* (but commonly known as *Towards a New Architecture*) is a collection of essays written by Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret), advocating for and exploring the concept of modern architecture. The book has had a lasting effect on the architectural profession, serving as the manifesto for a generation of architects, a subject of hatred for others, and unquestionably a critical piece of architectural theory. The architectural historian Reyner Banham once claimed that its influence was unquestionably "beyond that of any other architectural work published in this [20th] century to date",^[1] and that unparalleled influence has continued, unabated, into the 21st century.

² Ideas relating to the 'end of history' is not an essential connection with the abolition of historical obvious that the subject of architecture (theory-practice) provides a comfortable role that encounters already materialized forms concepts. In the interpretation of Adorno, Petar Krstic says that the entity takes the form hypostatized concept, and identify it with you, so subjective and transforming those phenomena that are not necessarily reducible to concepts. Abolition of historical consciousness and the release of the classic architectural form of conditionality becomes a stronghold of discursive absolutization reality, insensitive to its historical and social function to forward an external power that is conditional and disintegrate. Uniformity able stylistic forms of entropy is the result of an immanent dismissal from otherness facility and the narrowing of the experience of individual knowledge appropriately, the subjective principle of manipulation. Integral aesthetic-theoretical perspective that practice after modernism

produces its replication remains blind to the problem of convergence of perception, which is always at the service of the internal order. The end of history that arises here relates to the depletion of the metaphysical heritage which is a critical aspect of an integrated view of form shaped explosion in a stylish aesthetic modernism. Vattimo defines it as one that is seeing the end. the disappearance of architecture relating to the generalization paradigm, and expressed as the abolition of border aesthetic - in the direction of the metaphysical or historical-political range of forms. The opposite concept of the 'end of history' according watts binds to the emergence of new technologies, resulting in a precisely enabled media revolution, a special mode of generalization of aesthetics.

³ Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. United Kingdom: Stanford University Press.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Adorno, T. (2003). *Negative Dialectics*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Loos, A. (1998). *Ornament and crime: selected essays*. United States: Ariadne Press.

¹¹ Mertins, D. (2011). *Modernity Unbound: Other Histories of Architectural Modernity*. Belgium: Architectural Association.

¹² Vattimo, G. (1991). *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*. United States: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Berman, M. (1983). *All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity*. London: Verso.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Sloterdijk, P. (2013). *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁸ Levy, A., Menking, W., Gregotti, V. (2010). *Architecture on Display: On the History of the Venice Biennale of Architecture*. United Kingdom: Architectural Association..Preface by Brett Steele. P. 11

¹⁹ "Absorbing Modernity 1914–2014" has been proposed for the contribution of all the pavilions, and they too are involved in a substantial part of the overall research project, whose title is "Fundamentals".

²⁰ Adorno, T. (2003). *Negative Dialectics*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.