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CONDITIONS

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13

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Editorial XV

FUTURE CONDITIONS #15

NEW COMMONS

NEYRAN TURAN

In her recent essay titled "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," art historian Claire Bishop criticizes the recent social turn in contemporary art practices and criticism in which the aesthetic quality of an artwork is determined only through its social or ethical value.¹ In other words, if an art work has a social intention and favors relational ideas, such as interactivity, open-endedness, and participation, it is automatically received as good and affirmative while failing to limit the role of the aesthetic merely to the collapse of art into life.

A similar critique can be made for contemporary architecture at the moment. Take social

participation, infrastructural urbanism, or sustainability, in all of which architecture's role is reduced to either problem solving or ethical criteria. Triggered by global urbanization, environmental problems, and an emerging participatory culture of social networks and Web 2.0, social participation marks a fascination with the informality of the city and its bottom-up self-organization while infrastructural managerialism serves as an alibi for solving systemic problems. Both practices utilize "design research" techniques—mapping emergent urban phenomena with analytic tendencies—and favor scenario thinking, programming, interactivity, and

indeterminacy. Consequently, with these practices, architectural engagement turns into a form of neo-environmentalist do-goodism, producing an architectural version of "relational aesthetics."

These contemporary tendencies of engagement have been natural extensions of recent discussions on the inter-disciplinary nature of architecture especially after the early 1990s. Although these and similar approaches have provided valuable interdisciplinary conversations regarding the "expanded field" of architecture during the last two decades, at a much deeper level, however, aesthetic significance of that very same empowerment has been under-speculated. While

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an over-emphasis on content (program, scale, or system) has been pervasive for these discourses, the question of form remained as a mere consequence of processes and systems (be it infrastructural, environmental, parametric, or programmatic). As a result, the role of form and aesthetics for architecture have been limited to autonomous practices of digital form-making or the branding of the fantastic iconic building. In the meantime, architects who have been interested in form and certain aesthetic problems usually denounced the political dimension and condemned it as irrelevant. On the other hand, those who have been working with political and social concerns saw aesthetic problems as useless formalism. Reminding a similar observation made by architect Denise Scott Brown in 1975, this current condition marks a growing split between the architects' concern with form and their social idealism.²

Once historicized within the immediate past, the contemporary dilemma described above becomes nothing more than the newest version of an ever evolving disciplinary problem for architecture especially after the dissolution of the direct connection between the aesthetic and the functional attributes of design after modernism: the dialectic between architecture's singularity versus its total immersion within external forces, or between *context as core* versus *context as environment*. The discourse of the *context as core* have focused on autonomy and favored disciplinary history and form, whereas the discourse of the *context as environment* has speculated on interdisciplinary engagement and program. The abovementioned contemporary tendencies of engagement such

as social participation and infrastructural urbanism—which could all be formulated as one other version of the *context as environment* discourse—not only make evident these dualities of context apparent again but more importantly their respective limitations.

Take, for instance, recent disciplinary alignments in relation to the topics of infrastructure and landscape as they were integrated into the architectural knowledge within the last couple of decades. Various practices have explored the liberating possibilities of an urbanism enabled by flows, networks and systems. Positioned as a reaction to the nostalgic historicity and contextualism of the previous generation, classical ideas such as form and representation were de-emphasized by most of these practices. Instead, a sweeping tone of instrumental solutions pervaded in relation to abandoned airfields, contaminated waterfronts, or obsolete landfills. For these practices, formlessness was better than form. Flows were more fun than boundaries and objects. Although providing useful frameworks for architecture's relationship to large-scale systems in its preliminary years, with the current environmental problems and the ubiquitous topic of sustainability, these ideas present the risk of pure pragmatism and neo-environmentalist do-goodism. As the instrumental tone has slowly taken over the representational and the aesthetic, problem-solving has become the normative justification of an architectural project for some of these practices.

After ubiquitous contents, flows, continuous surfaces, sexy complexities, wild and soft urbanisms, and programmatic diagram architectures, the possibility of

an alternative project haunts our generation.

When asked about the relationship between architecture and design in the early 90s, German architect Mathias Ungers wrote: "I see myself as an architect as opposed to a designer. Design is about fashion and styling, whereas architecture is about construction, concepts, and space. Design has an excessive influence on architecture today. What we are left with is architecture of *substitution*."³ And, in 2004, a similar tone would repeat when Ungers commented on social engagement at an interview: "Social problems cannot be resolved by architecture. Indeed you can only solve architectural problems."⁴

Were these expressions indicative of a firm conservatism against architecture's relationships with other disciplines or a nostalgic pessimism for its impotence in the world? The answer would actually be none of the above.

What lied behind these statements was Ungers's life-long research and speculation on architecture's collective capacity to engage with the *world* (that is, with the environment on the one hand) as well as with its own *core* (that is, architecture's history and autonomy on the other) without resorting to naïve postulations at either extreme. This led an architect like Ungers to be dissatisfied with contained architectural dogmas of his time, all of which, in his view, were lost either in facts or within the hermetic nature of the architectural discipline. He was ambitiously looking for an architectural project of *both-and-neither*.

Similar to Ungers, rather than an overemphasis on an architectural core via pure form or an engagement with the world via pure content, can there be a speculative architectural project located as a third way between the two? Instead of seeing the architect either as an artist (autonomous formalism), an activist (social participation), or a technocrat (infrastructural managerialism), can we have a renewed conversation for architecture's role in the city?

A possible way out from this dilemma can only be possible with moving away from these limited dualities and searching for experimental ways to redefine the capacity of architectural aesthetics in engaging with the world.

This third way, which would be tentatively called, **New Commons (N/C)** would provide a radical ground for forging new and more productive relationships between aesthetics and engagement. Here, autonomy would not register so

much to a referral of an older definition (autonomy as retreat) but would instigate a yet-to-be-elaborated definition of discipline for contemporary architecture. And engagement would be neither perceived as a compromise nor as a celebrative immersion but would be understood as a specific and valuable content to relate to the world. The architect would not merely be portrayed as a respondent to problems, but as an active agent capable of building new ideas and languages as they relate to the city, the environment, and geography.

N/C might have bold premises but would not be easily be convinced by just nice statements and good intention. The search of **N/C** would be for the "how." Eager to experiment on a particular aesthetic project, **N/C** would choose to take risks for new methodologies to be engaged.

N/C awaits further speculation. **N/C** calls for a renewed conversation between *form* and *content*, one that is committed to the discipline of architecture yet is equally rigorous for original interpretations on both the political and disciplinary levels. **N/C** would not be scared of new questions regarding aesthetics, form and language while still being extremely rigorous in interdisciplinary engagement. **N/C** would strive for radical alternatives while being prepared for risks and productive failures.

Enough about reductive seductions. The time may have already arrived for anomalies of seductive reductions.

- 1 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Autumn 2004), pp. 51-79. Bishop's use of the term "relational aesthetics" is from Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).
- 2 Denise Scott Brown, "On Architectural Formalism and Social Concern: A Discourse for Social Planners and Radical Chic Architects," *Opposition 5* (Summer 1976): 99-112.
- 3 "O. M. Ungers," *Daidalos* 40 (June 1991): 74.
- 4 Rem Koolhaas and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "An Interview with O. M. Ungers," *Log* 16 (2009): 83.