

Considering a Vibrant Building Culture(s)

The question of *what is a vibrant building culture?* is perhaps more productively phrased as *how is a vibrant building culture achieved?*. This alteration understands the question as best answered from a perspective that views the current culture of building as less than vibrant. Acknowledging the inherently propositional nature of defining a vibrant building culture problematizes the concept and shifts the tone of its consideration from observational to critical. To consider its vibrancy in a meaningful way, the concept of building culture is considered from an abstract perspective, focussing upon the sociological and political realities that constitute and constrain it. A proposal of vibrant qualities within this building culture should subsequently align itself to these realities and be understood as constituting the first part of a two-step process, the second being the method of this vibrancy's achievement. The addition of a productive aspect to the initial question thus provides a more meaningful and relevant response. The formation of this response firstly consists of a consideration of the fundamentally capitalist nature of contemporary building culture. An inevitable relationship between vibrant building practice and this nature is subsequently proposed as simultaneously the source of both the problem and its solution.

Perhaps the most current analysis of a contemporary culture of building is presented by Reinier de Graaf in his recent book *Four Walls and a Roof*, a collection of anecdotal and theoretical essays that paint a loosely critical picture of the current disciplinary landscape of architecture. His writing focuses on the processes and structures that concern contemporary architecture, drawing from his own experience of architectural practice. The book reiterates the assertions Manfredo Tafuri first outlined with *Architecture and Utopia*; that contemporary architecture is primarily a vehicle of capital and has lost its capacity for social or emancipatory development. De Graaf's empirical (and contemporary) perspective adds a lucidity and realism that makes his analysis more applicable to the practical connotations suggested by the term of building culture. He highlights the shifted focus of architecture from provision to profit and the environment of corporatism that has proliferated during the political period of neoliberalism.ⁱ

The capitalist structures discussed by de Graaf oppose the concept of vibrancy on a number of levels. Fundamentally, the effect of applying a free market system to the practice of architecture is a narrowing of the wide-ranging concerns of the built environment to the single goal of an optimised return on investment. Aside from its obvious ethical problematics, this homogeneity of interest is reflected in a homogeneity of process; private, developer-led projects comprise the overwhelming majority of construction in the contemporary city. Predictability, certainty and order are the desirable qualities of this reality, contradictory to the values of heterogeneity, flux and unpredictability necessary for a vibrancy within the culture of building. The inability and unwillingness of a free market in providing these values proves its incompatibility with the concept of cultural vibrancy. There is an inseparable relationship between the concept of a contemporary building culture and capitalism. The acceptance of this reality is a necessity for any meaningful consideration of vibrancy within building culture. To consider alternative strategies autonomously, or to disregard the capitalist reality they must negotiate, fatally ignores the all-encompassing nature of capitalist development presented by Tafuri.

A more nuanced process of creating vibrancy is thus appropriate, in opposition to capitalism yet distinguished from the naiveté of idealism. This approach understands a diffuse and diverse reality as integral to the idea of vibrancy in building culture; a heterogeneity of cultures as opposed to a single defining dogma. A vibrant building culture is perhaps best defined as a collectivity of process and practice; in a cultural understanding, vibrancy inherently can't be achieved by a single strategy alone.

Accompanying this definition is the proposal of an anti-capitalist agenda as a necessity for this collectivity to be considered meaningfully vibrant. The presentation of this necessity is best conducted through examples of both practice and thought, displaying a multitude of vibrant building cultures and their characteristics, as well as their relationship to anti-capitalist themes.

Roughly summarised, the development of early postmodernist movement in architecture was both aesthetically and theoretically opposed to the homogeneity of The International Style that preceded it. This project is particularly evident in Scott Brown and Venturi's interrogation of the urban sprawl of Los Angeles and Rossi's seminal work *The Architecture of the City*. This work, especially that of *The Architecture of the City*, is primarily concerned with architectural intervention within, and the definition of, the contemporary capitalist city. Rossi proposed his theory of the city as an alternative to its totalistic planning that constituted, in his eyes, the new capitalist urban projectⁱⁱ. The specificity of the *locus* is proposed, in some capacity, as an alternative to socio-political homogeneity: the result of capitalist hegemony. The specifics of his theory aside, it is in Rossi's fundamental goal of disrupting capitalist totality that a vibrancy can be observed within his work.

Drawing from the earlier work of thinkers such as Rossi and Andrea Branzi, the architecture and writings of Pier Vittorio Aureli (Dogma) provide a contemporary theoretical challenge to dominant political and social structures. Aureli's proposition for the formation of alternative building cultures within capitalism is founded upon a *recontextualization* of Tafuri's critique of ideologyⁱⁱⁱ. This recontextualization consists of the explanation of Tafuri's work as an illustration of a subsumption of the intellectual perspective within capitalism, rendering an external critique impossible. Meaningful critique must thus be produced internally^{iv}. This assertion forms the theoretical foundation for the principal argument of this writing.

The practical application of this principal is conducted by the architectural collective Urban-Think Tank, through their practice of researching and constructing alternative architectural projects worldwide. By analysing alternative models of social housing, the group explores architectural convergences between state sanctioned social housing policy and market-led models^v. Their projects are situated within the emergent global economic and political conditions of *post-capitalist* and *post-socialist* cities^{vi}. The results of research of these conditions shapes the group's design process; they believe in the strategy of incremental development as a viable method of 'subverting profit motives within the market itself'^{vii}. Through incorporating user involvement within a structure of strategic state support, heterogeneity becomes intrinsic to the process and architecture of UTT. The informal and inclusive characteristics of this model create neighbourhoods 'safer and more socially vibrant than the surrounding urban sprawl'^{viii}. The methodology of UTT is aligned with many contemporary alternative projects, notably the projects of Elemental's half-houses in Chile and the exemplary community-led work of Assemble in the United Kingdom. Within all of these examples, the appropriation or subversion of economic restraints constitutes the point of their creative departure.

The projects discussed here illustrate building cultures opposed to the uncritical acceptance of progression, both architectural and capitalist, as positive. This work challenges and questions accepted norms, inducing cultural vibrancy in the practice of building through both the results of their work and its disruptive nature. It is important to note the lack of any fundamentally or ideologically anti-capitalist position within the argument presented here. An anti-capitalist mentality is presented here instead as a fundamentally important *method* to create a vibrant building culture. Capitalist development tends towards a superficial vibrancy of form alone, evident in the proliferation of iconicism, empty of any productive liveliness beyond the production of novel images. To view this variety of image, or its accompanying technological and material developments, as a

vibrancy of the built environment is to flatten the concept of vibrancy to one dimension. A meaningful vibrancy within building culture should consist of a significantly wider scope of social and cultural concerns and possibilities. In order to create such a vibrancy, a multitude of alternative and radical strategies must be employed throughout the collectivity of structures and relationships that constitute a contemporary building culture.

ⁱ Reinier de Graaf, 'Architecture is now a tool of capital, complicit in a purpose antithetical to its social mission', *Architectural Review*, (April 2015)

ⁱⁱ Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture Within and Against Capitalism*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2012, p. 57

ⁱⁱⁱ Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Recontextualising Tafuri's Critique of Ideology*, Log No. 18 (Winter 2010), *Anyone Corporation*

^{iv} Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Recontextualising Tafuri's Critique of Ideology*, Log No. 18 (Winter 2010), *Anyone Corporation*

^v Urban-Think Tank, *Capitalism and Freedom, Real Estates: Life Without Debt*, Bedford Press (2014), p. 69

^{vi} Urban-Think Tank, *Capitalism and Freedom, Real Estates: Life Without Debt*, Bedford Press (2014), p. 69

^{vii} Urban-Think Tank, *Capitalism and Freedom, Real Estates: Life Without Debt*, Bedford Press (2014), p. 74

^{viii} Urban-Think Tank, *Capitalism and Freedom, Real Estates: Life Without Debt*, Bedford Press (2014), p. 72