Vol. II

Patrik Schumacher

THE AUTOPOIESIS OF ARCHITECTURE

A New Agenda for Architecture
Vol. II

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To Zaha Hadid
Vol. II

Patrik Schumacher

THE AUTOPOIESIS OF ARCHITECTURE

A New Agenda for Architecture
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Introduction to Volume 2

This is the second volume of *The Autopoiesis of Architecture*. The two volumes together present a complete outline of the theory of architectural autopoiesis, a systematic treatise on architecture. This treatise proceeds via a comprehensive discourse analysis of the discipline, and on this basis tries to steer the discipline’s self-conception and development.

Volume 1 introduces a new theoretical framework within which architecture may analyze and confront itself in terms of its most fundamental concepts, methods and values. Volume 2 continues to analyze architecture’s discourse and proposes a new agenda for contemporary architecture in response to the challenges and opportunities posed by current societal and technological developments. The Volume ends with a manifesto for the new style of Parametricism, promoted as candidate to become the unified, epochal style for the 21st century. To be credible, a unified style must be backed up and guided by a unified theoretical edifice that is able to integrate many partial theories: a theory of architecture’s societal function, a theory of the discipline’s self-demarcation, a theory of the avant-garde, aesthetic theory, media theory, process theory etc. The theory of architectural autopoiesis presents such an integrated theoretical edifice. It is nothing other than the rational reconstruction and systematization of the discursively evolving discipline, made explicit as unified theory and opened up to criticism and constructive elaboration. Selective rational reconstruction and systematization are necessary to give coherent guidance to a comprehensive architectural practice that covers the totality of the built environment and its contemporary adaptive challenges.¹

Architecture is one of the great function systems of modern, functionally differentiated society. The theory of architectural autopoiesis is a reflection theory or self-description of architecture formulated from within architecture. As such its purpose is to contribute to the necessary self-steering of the autopoiesis of architecture. Like all reflection theories – for example, economic theories, jurisprudence, the

¹ The coherence of a unified theory helps to avoid self-contradiction in addressing the different theoretical and practical questions a multi-faceted discipline like architecture poses. A unified theory gives one’s various statements and practical engagements consistency. Without such guidance one is prone to get in one’s own way, blocking yesterday’s achievements with today’s efforts. A unified theory is necessary to give leadership to the discipline. It is of practical urgency with respect to giving consistent leadership to a large firm like ZHA operating globally across all programmes and scales.
epistemologies formulated within science, political theories etc – the theory of architectural autopoiesis oscillates between descriptive and normative modes of theorizing. Of necessity, as committed inside communication, it is simultaneously a descriptive and a normative theory. By describing, conceptually systematizing and reconstructing the rationality of architecture’s history and current state, the theory gathers the necessary internal connectivity to make normative claims and projections plausible. The tension between descriptive and normative moments permeates the totality of The Autopoiesis of Architecture. However, the balance between the two moments is struck differently in the two volumes. From Volume 1 to Volume 2, as we move from framework to agenda, the balance shifts towards the normative pole, and indeed includes more projective, speculative moments.

The elaboration of architecture’s agenda in Volume 2 proceeds in six parts, parts 6–11:

Part 6 The Task of Architecture sets out the general task of architecture in the terms of architecture’s lead-distinction: to give form to function. An adequate concept of how to understand and address functions within contemporary architecture is proposed. Architecture’s task is then elaborated along two dimensions: organization and articulation. To meet contemporary challenges architecture must enhance its capacity in both dimensions. Theoretical resources that contribute to this enhancement are brought to bear: network theory, Gestalt theory and semiology. In particular, an axiomatic framework for reinvigorating the semiological project within architecture is provided. The elaboration of spatial complexes as systems-of-signification is promoted as a core competency of architecture.

Part 7 The Design Process elaborates the second item on the agenda: the enhancement of architecture’s design process reflection. Here the achievements of the design methods movement are recuperated. Design rationality is challenged by the expectation of continuous innovation as well as by the increasing complexity of architecture’s task domain. Many design tasks are new and complex. This double burden demands a new theoretical reflection concerning the methodological credentials of design processes as rational decision processes. The theory of architectural autopoiesis offers a conceptual apparatus for the description and analysis of design processes, promotes innovative design process heuristics and

2 The fact that every ambitious self-description enters an ideological battleground concerning the discursive culture and direction of the discipline/profession is more palpable in Volume 2. However, aggressive polemics have been deliberately avoided in order to allow the elaboration of a coherent theoretical system to take precedence. The hope is that the analyses, theses and projections deliver a package that convinces without polemical battles.
attempts to formulate adequate contemporary criteria of design rationality.³

Part 8 Architecture and Society addresses the necessity for the autopoiesis of architecture to update and upgrade its internal representation of society in line with society’s development. Luhmann’s conception of a polycontextual, functionally differentiated world society is – once more – offered as adequate conceptual horizon for architecture’s orientation. The dialectical relationship – coevolution – between the autopoiesis of architecture and its societal environment is addressed in Luhmann’s terms. Then the reflection goes deeper and touches on the fundamental dependence of society’s emergence and ongoing development on the built environment as the indispensable substratum of socio-cultural evolution. Finally, the investigation turns to the manifold societal conditions and institutions on which the autopoiesis of architecture depends.

Part 9 Architecture and Politics addresses architecture’s relationship with one of the subsystems within its societal environment: the political system. Architecture’s relationship with the political system is singled out for in-depth analysis not because of the inherent importance of this relationship but because of the widespread, disorienting illusions that abound concerning this relationship. The theoretical clarification of architecture’s systemic position relative to the political system becomes the premise for the attempt to define an adequate, productive role for avant-garde architecture in relation to contemporary politics.

Part 10 The Self-descriptions of Architecture presents key treatises that have been seminal in the historical evolution of architecture’s autopoiesis. This agenda item – architecture’s self-descriptions – reveals the general requirement that architecture, like all function systems of society, must reflect its own constitution with respect to its societal function in order effectively to steer itself in the absence of authoritative directives from outside. Comprehensive theoretical treatises are the most adequate form this necessary reflection can take. Three key texts have been selected and subjected to a detailed, parallel analysis: Alberti’s treatise of 1485,⁴ Durand’s treatise of 1802–5, and Le Corbusier’s treatise of 1923. These treatises are confident, comprehensive accounts of the discipline, each reflecting architecture’s societal function and arguing for principles, methods and repertoires that should guide the

³ Adequacy here means that the criteria allow us to critique and enhance design proposals without imposing sterile and unrealistic ideals.
⁴ Alberti’s De re aedificatoria was written in 1450. It first circulated as a hand-copied manuscript and was then published in 1485 as the first printed book on architecture.