Critical of What?
Toward a Utopian Realism

by **Reinhold Martin**

There has long been a tendancy in architecture to erect straw figures only to knock them down. In his article "'Criticality' and its Discontents," published in the Fall 2004/Winter 2005 issue of *Harvard Design Magazine* dedicated to "Realism and Utopianism," George Baird admirably—and, I think, accurately—summarizes recent efforts to do just that.[1] These entail the identification of and subsequent assault on something called "the critical" or "critical architecture," usually accompanied by a collateral assault on something called "theory." At the risk of erecting yet another straw figure that tramples on the subtleties of Baird's analysis, it might be fair to characterize such practices, variously named "post-critical" or "projective," as sharing a commitment to an affect-driven, nonoppositional, nonresistant, nondissenting, and therefore nonutopian form of architectural production. But as Baird notes, these efforts have thus far failed to deliver an actual, affirmative project, settling instead for vague adjectives like "easy," "relaxed," and—perish the thought—"cool." Baird therefore concludes his article by asking (with critical overtones?) what they expect to yield in the form of discourse or what he calls "critical assess-

ment." In other words, by what criteria is the "post-critical" asking to be judged, beyond mere acceptance and accommodation of existing societal, economic, or cultural norms?

This question seems worth pursuing but also, perhaps, rephrasing. Since, as with all the other "posts" that preceded it, the "post-critical" (or "relaxed" or "projective") assumes the existence of what it denounces or, in any event, criticizes. Here Baird offers a useful, fair summary of the official history of "critical architecture." To this, however we might append another question: critical of what? Since, it must also be noted that this history actually collapses two opposing positions into one, largely through generational iteration. In the first instance, the "critical" in architecture is assumed to have been defined by a Frankfurt School-style negative dialectics associated with historians and theorists such as Manfredo Tafuri and his American readers, such as Michael Hays. This position usually winds up testifying not to the existence of a critical *architecture*, but to its impossibility, or at most, its irreducible negativity in the face of the insurmountable violence perpetrated by what the economist Ernest Mandel called, some time ago, "late capi-

talism." Meanwhile—as the story goes—architects like Peter Eisenman have explicitly professed their disinterest in either resisting or affirming such violence at the level of academic and professional practice, preferring instead to dedicate themselves to a vigorous negation and revision of the *internal* assumptions of the discipline, in the form of the so-called autonomy project. Thus Eisenman's provocative turn to Giuseppi Terragni's work for the Italian fascists as a model, under the argument that its formal syntax could be separated definitively from its political semantics. (This example is dutifully replicated—minus the theory—by post-critics such as Michael Speaks, in their championing of jargon and techniques associated with right-wing think tanks and the CIA.) Whereas, the traditional ground on which the two "critical" approaches have met is that of a dialectic, in which aesthetic autonomy acts as a kind of temporary stand-in for the autonomy of the Enlightenment subject pending the arrival of concrete social transformation, or as Theodor Adorno would have it, a negative mirror that reflects that subject's ineluctable demise.

Baird observes that most of the proponents of a "post-critical" position whom he names have passed through academic or professional circles associated with these other older names. But more importantly, we might add, they seem to have accepted rather obediently a central proposition implied by Eisenman's use of the word *critical* with respect to his own work: that the stakes of an internal critique of a supposedly autonomous architecture, and the attendant pursuit of a "new" architecture that continually reinvents its own autonomy are somehow equivalent to—rather than dialectically engaged with—a critique of architecture's tragic, a priori collaboration with the external forces it appears to resist, as elaborated by Tafuri with respect to the modernist avant-gardes. In other words, the assumption hidden in naming Eisenman the father of a "critical architecture" that a subsequent generation now chooses to kill off is that there is somehow an equivalence between a *political* critique (as adumbrated by historians and theorists

like Tafuri) and an *aesthetic* critique (as adumbrated by architects like Eisenman).

On the other hand, it is somewhat surprising to find the "paranoid-critical" Rem Koolhaas taken up as a more positive role model by the post-critics, despite the time he may or may not have spent surfing on the late capitalist beach. But either way, whether the name of the father is Peter or Rem, the post-critical project is deeply Oedipal. This is a point worth making less on the grounds of institutional history (however substantial the evidence may be), than on the theoretical-philosophical grounds that continue to haunt even the most resolute of anti-theorists. Since a number of those named by Baird, as well as their immediate ideological colleagues, have at one time or another also invoked the name of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze as a comrade in arms—at least before this became too embarrassing, since it was pointed out time and again that in doing so they were distorting the Deleuzian politico-philosophical project so as to render it unrecognizable. And yet, folds and rhizomes aside, one source of such embarrassment persists, in the form of another, "difficult" book that Deleuze co-authored with Félix Guattari—the *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), which is nothing less than a frontal assault—epistemological, philosophical, psychoanalytical, historical, political—on the parochial family trees and "generations" so dear to those who compulsively fetishize "criticality" in order to kill it off for good.

It has been said many times that the *Anti-Oedipus* is a book of the '60s. And, given that Baird explicitly situates the front lines of the "post-critical" debate in the United States, it is worth noting that contemporary American electoral politics—down to the most recent, bloody skirmish in the culture wars—has often been said to amount to a referendum on the countercultural radicalism associated with that decade. So, is it possible that the "post-critical" polemic is, like the more general rightward swing in American politics, actually a rather thinly disguised effort to bury the utopian politics of the 1960s once and for all? In other words, is it possible that all of the re-

laxed, "post-critical" Oedipality is—in direct opposition to the antiauthoritarian *Anti-Oedipus*—actually an authoritarian call to order that wants once and for all to kill off the ghost of radical politics by converting political critique into aesthetic critique and then slowly draining *even that* of any dialectical force it may have inadvertently retained?

I ask this question with some regret, since it is addressed mainly to those who rush to denounce serious critique (whether political or aesthetic) as an inconvenient obstacle to professional advancement at the very moment that the very possibility of *any* critique of the status quo must be defended more vigorously than ever. But as an architect, I am also well aware of the very real difficulties of actually practicing architecture (and getting paid for it) while voicing even the most mild of objections. Thus the usual response is this: architecture is in any case so thoroughly disempowered, so culturally marginal, as to render any critique emanating from within its walls, so to speak, ineffectual if not entirely irrelevant. What must be sought is a more "robust," more "effective" architecture. This is said to apply in extra measure to academic theory, to say nothing of history, which together are judged to be doubly irrelevant by virtue of their supposed obscurity. So why bother?

But these assertions amount to a category error, since the problem is not that architectural discourse is too academic to have any political relevance, but that it is not academic enough. There is nothing "irrelevant" about the very real politics of the universities that post-critics still depend on for their livelihood, where very real professors are regularly denounced by very real cultural conservatives, often prompting anguished symposia on academic freedom (a relevant political concept if there ever was one) in response. The heroic efforts of the late Edward Said and many other such intellectuals are testimony to the significance of academic practice in the international arena of *realpolitik*. Likewise Jacques Derrida, whose recent passing drew a shameful, defensive "obituary" from the *New York Times* that specifically projected academic

discourse onto politics. But perhaps the most telling of such episodes recently was the roundtable of distinguished academics convened in 2003 by the editors of the aptly named journal *Critical Inquiry* to assess the "future of theory." That meeting also drew the attention of the *New York Times*, which concluded that "The Latest Theory is That Theory Doesn't Matter."[2] While for its part, *Critical Inquiry* published the results of all the fractiousness—coming mainly from the political *left*—while concluding editorially that "theory" does matter after all, just not in the way we might have thought.

But perhaps of greater interest to architecture here are two longer articles not directly associated with the conference that appeared in the same issue. The first, by the philosopher of science Bruno Latour, was titled "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern."[3] It summarized Latour's recent efforts to replace an epistemology infused by the spirit of revolt and radical politics with a new realism founded on ever-contestable "matters of concern" rather than indisputable "facts." For Latour, "critique" is basically code for Marxism, which, along with other modernisms and their denunciatory tendencies, he is at pains to denounce and replace with a vaguely postmodern version of American pragmatism oriented toward renovating the institutions of parliamentary democracy. Thus, if architecture's self-proclaimed "post-critical" party still resides in the so-called blue states, those of its members still willing to be identified as liberals might find some solace in Latour's method of resolving what used to be called capitalism's "contradictions"—i.e., doing "critical" architecture and still getting paid for it.

For those of firmer constitution, that particular issue of *Critical Inquiry* also offered a text by the theorist Slavoj Žižek, titled "The Ongoing 'Soft Revolution.'"[4] There Žižek, an unapologetic (if unorthodox) Marxist, conjures the particularly poignant image of "a yuppie reading Deleuze," through which he provocatively claims certain affinities between the apparatus of desire exemplified by

advertising and affect-producing Deleuzian "desiring machines." Žižek is well aware of the reductivism of this claim, and he goes on here and elsewhere to give Deleuze and Guattari their full due as philosophers of radical social transformation. Still, the image of a "yuppie reading Deleuze" stays with us, and it is with this image that I want to offer a brief, concrete response to Baird's call for a critical assessment of an avowedly "post-critical" architecture.

Perhaps the most obvious demonstration of contemporary, theoretically informed architecture's all-too-relevant political efficacy has been in the ongoing debate over the future of the former World Trade Center site in lower Manhattan. From the myriad dimensions in which this has unfolded, I want to excerpt one specific example: the proposal designed by the group of "post-critical" fellow travelers (some of whom represent that tendency's European version) that called itself the United Architects.[5]

The story really begins with the exhibition organized in New York by the gallerist Max Protetch titled "A New World Trade Center" that ran from January 17 through February 16 2002. There, a mere four months after the attacks, the public was presented with fifty-eight proposals by architects, designers, and artists that, according to the gallery, together represented "a landmark opportunity both for architects and the general public to explore the possibilities for the World Trade Center site."[6] On the one hand (and running parallel with the increased swagger of American foreign policy), this was a raw, unvarnished effort to exploit the "landmark opportunity" offered by 9/11's presumptive clearing of the decks—a chance to fulfill a heroic vision (post-Saddam and post-postmodern?) already prepared in think tanks and universities but theretofore preempted by the exigencies of professional realism. While on the other hand, the Protetch exhibition was also the first real evidence of the capacities of a neomodern aesthetics to channel the will to power in directions inaccessible to the more literal conformisms of architecture's corporate, contextualist mainstream.

Symptomatic of things to come on this front was the project submitted by Foreign Office Architects (FOA) for an undulating tower of bundled tubes, accompanied by these remarks: "Let's not even consider remembering. . . . What for? We have a great site in a great city and the opportunity to have the world's tallest building back in New York. Ground Zero used to host 1.3M m² of workspace, and that is a good size to attempt to return to NY what it deserves."[7]

Though it remains unclear what New York "deserves" to forget, it is abundantly clear that such willful amnesia refers not only to a salutary rejection of the often sanctimonious imperatives of memorialization, but also to an active blindness to the historical conditions of which 9/11 was only one component. Hardly disguised, this "end of history" argument for a new historical type—a new type of skyscraper—exploits its own contradictions to monumentalize, in exemplary "post-critical" fashion, the neoliberal consensus regarding new "opportunities" opened up by techno-corporate globalization. Accordingly, the responsibility of professionals in the new world order is confined to facilitating the arrival of the "new," while washing their hands of the overdetermined historical narratives—and the dead bodies —through which this new is named.

Comparable in posture here was the project submitted by Greg Lynn FORM for a prototypical defensible skyscraper insightfully premised on "the collapse of boundaries between global military conflict and everyday life."[8] Rather than dissent, however, the prototype and its author naturalize this state of affairs—which was long ago given the name "total war"—in a collapse of even the most rudimentary critique into an excited monotone. The resulting hymn to total war only makes sense when seen against the backdrop of Lynn's ongoing commitment to the supposed inner, digital logic of the instruments of production and consumption associated with Hollywood's military-entertainment complex, with overtones of the German military aesthete, Ernst Jünger. Thus Lynn as-

serts, with a lucid cynicism, "The transfer of military thinking into daily life is inevitable."[9]

In September 2002 the United Architects, an international collection of relatively young designers including Lynn and FOA, were among the six teams chosen by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) to produce what the LMDC called "innovative" designs for the site. In support of their selection, the LMDC press release referred to the team as "visionaries" in possession of an expertise in, among other things, "theory," an official characterization that uncannily reproduces Žižek's hilarious image of a "yuppie reading Deleuze."

Also included in the team of young professionals that called itself the United Architects was the Hollywood-based entertainment, design, and marketing firm Imaginary Forces. And indeed, at Ground Zero the public relations message emanating from the team began with their name, which resourcefully morphed the United States into the United Nations, a hybrid that itself dissolved into a transnational becoming-Benetton in the team's group portrait — assembled multiracial faces in a field of colored squares. In support of the implied theme of resolute unity-within-in-diversity (in the face of a "faceless" enemy?), the project statement offered rhetoric about solemnly moving forward, while images of the scheme proclaimed the result—the crystalline "United Towers"—a "bold vision of the future" dedicated to "returning pride to the site."[10]

And the Deleuzianism? Difference within continuity: a "single continuous building" that differentiated itself into five linked towers built in five phases. A monument to corporate "diversity," the project internalized the naturalized growth fantasies of global capitalism in the form of a relentless, evolutionary development of the site. Affective, nationalist unity ("pride") was shown not to preclude "difference"—a basic premise of the kinder, gentler imperialism recently ratified by the American electorate. An architectural avant-garde thus switches sides in the ongoing culture wars that brought (critical, poststructuralist) "theory" into the discipline with a vengeance in

the 1980s. Since by responding obediently to the call for architectural "vision" while remaining utterly blind to the violence of the package they served up, these architects and others put themselves in a position of docile compliance with the imperatives of a nation at war.

Likewise for the proposal's symbolism, which in many ways crossed nationalism with theological pathos more systematically than did Daniel Libeskind's expressionist winning entry. It required only a little "imaginary force" to see the corporate, crypto-Gothic "cathedral" (their term) designed by United Architects as a baldly symbolic response to an act associated with militant Islam. The skyscraper—Cass Gilbert's "cathedral of commerce"—meets Philip Johnson's *Crystal Cathedral*. But by melting such ruthlessly "meaningful" religious symbolisms into a dynamic series of visual effects that had the buildings dissolving into a majestic forest in an accompanying video while simultaneously allowing the more unconscious impression of a family of skyscrapers holding hands in the absence of the missing "twins," the project also set in motion a fluid dynamics comparable to that which organized subsequent militarization, as American political fantasies morphed Osama into Saddam. In the architecture of becoming that mixed spirituality with marketing offered up by the United Architects, the particular, violent irony of the United States claiming to act morally on behalf of the United Nations (to *become*, in effect, the United Nations) in invading Iraq was prefigured, affectively and aesthetically.

Though their project was apparently not his favorite, then-*New York Times* architecture critic Herbert Muschamp proposed renaming the United Architects (using rhetoric reminiscent of Dave Hickey, a favorite "post-critical" aesthetic theorist) "The International House of Voluptuous Beauty" in recognition of their apparent efforts to realize "form for form's sake,"[11] while elsewhere in the *Times*, theologian and erstwhile architecture theorist Mark C. Taylor was enlisted into the cause. Surprisingly, Taylor complied by offering the extraordinary exhortation to avoid "becoming obsessed with

a past we will never understand" and instead turn optimistically toward the future. Though aimed primarily at the memory industry, such collateral (if unintentional) dismissals of any effort to *articulate* the historical dimensions of 9/11 as so much backward-looking nostalgia continued to confuse images of "progress" with positive historical change and mystification with critical reflection. Chillingly, as if to underline the elision, Taylor approvingly concluded his summary with the message he heard coming from the United Architects: *"e pluribus unum."*[12]Again, what looks progressive fades into its opposite.

The subsequent chapters in the story are well known, down to the made-for-television struggle between Libeskind and David Childs for control of the project's architectural image that Childs eventually won. Like the distorted smatterings of "theory" in the discourse of those who would eventually become the United Architects, it is possible that Libeskind's emotionalism simply became redundant, as images of "progressive" architecture—including Libeskind's—circulating in the winter of 2002–2003 were replaced on American television screens that spring with images of the "shock and awe" bombing campaign in Baghdad. Total war had been waged in the aesthetic training camp called Ground Zero, only to be projected back outward, in near-perfect symmetry.

This, then, was not merely a sordid rerun of what Walter Benjamin once famously called the aestheticization of politics. It was aesthetics *as* politics. By enthusiastically accepting the protocols of cultural (and architectural) "progress" for its own sake, "post-critical" architects showed themselves all too willing to assist politically in the prosecution of a virtual war that was soon to go live. While even today, many prefer to misrecognize the demand for "vision" as an "opportunity" that was later betrayed by the back room deals of developers and politicians, rather than the overexposed intensification of neoimperial desires that it represented from the beginning. Thus, the global city prepared itself to market an image of supposedly enlightened

rationality symbolized in a "visionary" architecture. The dilemma, simply put, was that this gesture was made *in the service of* an emboldened sense of empire and war on all fronts, and not against it.

To be sure, for more sober practitioners of the "post-critical," the liberal-humanist idea of the "project" supplants theological vision as a guide. Hence, architecture and/or architects who are merely critical (or "merely" antiwar?) are judged to have insufficiently fulfilled the old, modernist mission of being "projective" and of thereby affirming an enlightened alternative. But just as we can justifiably ask of the straw figure called critical architecture, "critical of what?" we might ask the affirmative, projective practitioners of the "post-critical" just what sort of world they are projecting and affirming in their architecture and in their discourse?

If the answer is anything close to that offered by the United Architects, then I vote "No"—despite its many legitimate claims to an authentic, technologically enabled urbanity.[13] Still, those who lament the relentless negativity of much critique (such as, perhaps, that offered above) are at least partly right, since, the problem is not that critical discourse is too difficult and therefore ineffectual. The problem is that it is often too easy. Bruised by the complicities of what Tafuri called "operative criticism," much critical work does not risk intervening in the future in the systematic manner for which, I think, many architects rightly yearn. Similarly, the need to engage directly with messy realities called for by some post-critics is indeed urgent. The question is which realities you choose to engage with, and to what end. In other words: what's your project? This also means avoiding the elementary mistake of assuming that reality is entirely real— that is, pre-existent, fixed, and therefore exempt from critical re-imagination. For this, alliances are necessary.

So, what is to be done? To begin with, rather than lapse into the post-utopian pragmatism of that grandfather of the "post-critical," Colin Rowe, the question of utopia must be put back on the architectural table. But it must not be misread as a call for a perfect world, a world apart, an impossible totality that inevitably fades into totalitarianism. Instead, utopia must be read literally, as the "non-place" written into its etymological origins that is "nowhere" not because it is ideal and inaccessible, but because, in perfect mirrored symmetry, it is also "everywhere." Utopia is both glamorous and boring, exceptional and prosaic. Among its heralds is another, earlier denizen of lower Manhattan, Herman Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener, an anonymous, modest clerk who, when asked literally to reproduce what the '60s would later call "the system," simply and politely refused, declaring "I would prefer not to."

Utopia, then, is what Derrida called a "specter," a ghost that infuses everyday reality with other, possible worlds, rather than some otherworldly dream. And if another name for the so-called post-critical is "realism," we have already seen at Ground Zero how architecture's realist fantasies of twisting, dancing skyscrapers have worked systematically to exorcise utopia's ghost with crystal cathedrals dedicated to a fundamentalist oligarchy. But like all ghosts, that specter is never quite dead, returning to haunt architectural projects already quietly among us and others coming soon. We can call these projects the first evidence of a "utopian realism" (details to follow). Meanwhile, utopian realism must be thought of as a movement that may or may not exist, all of whose practitioners are double agents. Naming them, or their work, would blow their cover. (They may or may not all be architects.) Those who could voted for Kerry. (So you, too, could be a utopian realist.) Utopian realism is critical. It is real. It is enchantingly secular. It thinks differently. It is a style with no form. It moves sideways, instead of up and down the family tree. It is (other) worldly. It occupies the global city rather than the global village. It violates disciplinary codes even as it secures them. It is utopian not because it dreams impossible dreams, but because it recognizes "reality" itself as—precisely—an all-too-real dream enforced by those who prefer to accept a destructive and oppressive status quo. Utopia's ghost floats within this dream, conjured time and again by those who would prefer not to. □

NOTES

1. George Baird, "'Criticality' and its Discontents," *Harvard Design Magazine* 21, Fall 2004/Winter 2005, 16–21.
2. Emily Eakin, "The Latest Theory is that Theory Doesn't Matter," *New York Times*, April 19, 2003, D9.
3. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 2004, 225–248.
4. Slavoj Žižek, "The Ongoing 'Soft Revolution.'" *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 2004, 292–323.
5. For a more detailed analysis of the architectural discourse surrounding the World Trade Center projects, see Reinhold Martin, "Architecture at War: A Report from Ground Zero," in *Angelaki*, August 2004, 217–225. My account here of the United Architects project is adapted from that article.
6. Max Protetch, "A New World Trade Center: Exhibition Overview," <www.maxprotech.com/SITE/PREVIOUS/ANEWWTC/index.html>.
7. Foreign Office Architects, "A New World Trade Center: Foreign Office Architects Bunch Tower," <www.maxprotech.com/SITE/PREVIOUS/ANEWWTC/FOA/index.html>.
8. Greg Lynn FORM, "A New World Trade Center: Greg Lynn FORM, A New World Trade Center," <www.maxprotech.com/SITE/PREVIOUS/ANEWWTC/FORM/index.html>.
9. Ibid.
10. Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, "Introduction," <www.renewnyc.com/plan_des_dev/wtc_site/new_design_plans/firm_f/default.asp.htm>.
11. Herbert Muschamp, "The Latest Round of Designs Rediscover and Celebrate Vertical Life," *New York Times*, December 19, 2002, B10.
12. Mark C. Taylor, "Beyond Mourning, Building Hope on Ground Zero," *New York Times*, Arts & Leisure, December 29, 2002, 40.
13. It must be noted that two other projects in the LMDC study, associated with other figures in the current debate over criticality, played out somewhat more convincing endgames: the mute, negative symbol of architecture-as-such (a grid turning a corner) produced by Eisenman, Charles Gwathmey, Steven Holl, and Richard Meier; and the equally mute field of leaning towers (Hilberseimer with a twist?) produced by Stan Allen and James Corner in collaboration with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and others. Neither project, however, offered a systematic alternative to the politically charged demand for symbolism in which the LMDC study was framed.