

**Challenging the Repression of Utopian
Discourse (Synopsis)**

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The numerous architectural-political, architectural-social, architectural-cultural events¹ denoting the revival of architecture and planning discourse in Israel, oblige us to ask ourselves whether there has been a radical shift in the thought and methodology of the discipline. Is this a fashionable embrace of a political discourse or a real debate about the values of our society? I address these issues in the Israeli-Palestinian context, of societies of immigrants and refugees embroiled in a bloody conflict over a disputed environment. This context gives rise to extreme situations which spell out critical, moral and humanist questions that, in turn, present the current architectural² praxis hyper-realistically, in all its helplessness and bareness. However, this condition is not exclusive to Israel,³ and it would be helpful to understand it in the context of contemporary *Architectural Culture*,⁴ and the relationship between *Critical Discourse* and *Radical Practice*. In this editorial three primary questions are discussed: (1) what is radical practice? (2) What is radical practice in the age of late capitalism? (3)

Does radical practice exist in Israel?
Critical Discourse, Radical Practice
Radical discourse in architecture has traditionally been identified with the avant-garde,⁵ which aroused much debate in the seventies. One of the prominent voices was that of Manfredo Tafuri⁶ who attacked the postmodern avant-garde agenda as lacking in social vision and not tackling architecture's ideologies and political implications. Thus, and despite the frequent use of the term 'radical' in the discourse, architecture and avant-garde were virtual antonyms.⁷ This was not

any, influence on the built environment, but because architecture adjusted itself to the radical movements that emerged from the fine arts. Today this source of influence has been significantly expanded to include geography, sociology philosophy, cultural studies, and other disciplines, all of which have contributed considerably to the critical discourse of architecture and planning. For these reasons, it is worthwhile considering both where we stand today, and the current agenda of the critical discourse.

It is possible identify at least three fields of debate. One is the eternal tension between the professional and the critic. This debate revolved around what the critics now call the *post-critical* era, a pragmatic approach that emphasizes materiality, technology and architecture as spectacle. Post-critical practices celebrate the global economy and mass tourism, and avoid political agendas and engagement with cultural differences.⁸ This approach, (that is anchored in the architectural schools of America, and the influential works of Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas, and Robin Evans among others),⁹ is often elusive, since it tends to use a language of multiplicities, differences and flexibility, while at the same time avoiding critical assessment of the production contexts in which they operate. For better or for worse, argues Mark Dorian, in post-critical practice, the rhetoric of crisis that characterized the discourse of the 60s and 70s, has almost disappeared.¹⁰

A second subject of debate, mainly in the planning discourse, tackles the tension between *planning from below* and institutional planning. Strategies of planning from below, argues Bish Sanyal, have an inadvertent side effect, i.e. lack of attention to public- sector planning and to institutional mechanisms that are essential in any social development and change.¹¹ Furthermore, these trends have shifted professional focus from the object itself, i.e. the city, to action-oriented methods such as advocacy¹² and communicative planning.¹³ These strategies deal primarily with distribution of resources by mapping the requirements of different

groups and operating within an existing order. As a result, planning has become a matter of negotiation, but neglects to foster visions that are mandatory for the implementation of social justice. The third field is the architectural and planning discourse itself, as it re-examines its goals and opportunities. This self-reflective debate addresses the interdisciplinary nature of a discourse which, on one hand, is important for restructuring the discipline but, on the other hand, is not successful in influencing architectural practice. The problem is that the critic's intellectual framework is located beyond the boundaries of the discipline, which is comfortable, safe, sometimes fashionable, and easily adopted by professionals without challenging their practice. The Israeli case is an example of this, in that any professional or researcher can easily identify with it - it is enough to be against conservation, against the Israeli separation wall, against one's own identity. Ultimately, this discourse changes neither one's position or perception about architecture and planning, nor give rise to significant change. It reverts to what I call *critical-passive* discourse – a discourse that does not really succeed in creating any active change in thinking or acting methodologies.

These debates and the contemporary condition of both practice and critical theory, leads us to other questions: why has architectural discourse dissociated itself from utopian discourse? How is it possible that the utopian message has vanished in this most urbanized epoch, when urban demography has doubled and tripled worldwide? How can we validate distancing ourselves from the universal at a time of contestation over urban resources and territories? This contemporary urban reality and the separation and sometimes hostility between critics (theoreticians) and operators (professionals)¹⁴ oblige us to re-address the definitions of radical practice and its possible contribution today.

(1) What is radical practice?
The term *Architectural Radical Practice* is comprised of three words: *Architecture* (the art or science of

¹ See for example the annual conference of the Israel Architecture Association, *Archi-Politics* (2005) and the annual conference of the Israel Landscape Association *Fences and Definitions* (2005).

² Throughout the paper I use the term 'architecture' in its broader sense which includes the built environment as a whole, the profession, planning and landscape architecture, and architecture.

³ See for example the conference on Critical Architecture, Bartlett School of Architecture, London (2004).

⁴ See the definition of Architectural Culture in: Rachel Kallus and Tali Hatuka (eds.), *Architectural Culture: Place, Representation, Body*, (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005), pp. 9-25.

⁵ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

⁶ Manfredo Tafuri, "L'architecture dans le Boudoir, The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language", *Oppositions* 3 (1974), pp. 37–62.

⁷ Giorgio Grassi, "Avant-garde and Continuity" [1980], in Michael K. Hays (ed.): *Oppositions Reader: Selected Readings from a*

Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture 1973-1984 (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998) pp. 391–401.

⁸ Murray Frazer, "The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture", *Journal of Architecture* 10/3 (2005), pp. 317-322 esp. p. 320.

⁹ Mark Dorian, "Criticism, Negation, Action", *Journal of Architecture* 10/3 (2005), pp. 229-233. esp. p 230.

¹⁰ With the exceptions of works which address issues of ecology and population density. p.229.

¹¹ Bishwapiya Sanyal, "Planning as Anticipation of Resistance," *Planning Theory*, 4 (2005), pp. 225–245.

¹² Paul Davidoff, "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning", *JAIP* 31(4), (November, 1965): pp. 331-337.

¹³ Judith E. Innes, "Information in Communicative Planning", *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 64/1(1998), pp. 52–63; John Forester, *Planning in the Face of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Patsy Healy, *Collaborative Planning: shaping Places in Fragmented Societies* (London: Macmillan, 1997); Huxley Margo & Oren Yiftachel, "A New Paradigm of Old Mytopia? Unsettling the Communicative Turn in Planning Theory", *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 19(4) (2000), pp. 333–342

¹⁴ According to Tafuri, criticism rarely derives from the autonomy of architecture and must borrow from other bodies of knowledge. Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture* (New York : Harper & Row, 1980)

urban planning, building, or constructing edifices of any kind for human use); *Radical* (of or pertaining to a root or roots, fundamental); *Practice* (the action of doing, performance, execution; working, operation; method of action or working). In other words, *Architectural Radical Practice* is an action-oriented framework that fosters innovation and addresses the built environment as a socio-political and cultural artifact. I suggest that *Architectural Radical Practice* must include: *the will to power*, *the will to criticize*, and *the will to reform*.

The will to power is discussed in Nietzsche's writings, in which living things are not merely driven by the need to survive, but by a stronger need to wield and use power, to grow and expand their influence and, possibly, to subsume other "wills" in the process.¹⁵ For Nietzsche the will to power also means the human redefinition of an event as his/her own truth. What we define as 'barbarous' is essentially a set of direct and crude strategies for restoring the feeling of power by demonstrating the power to hurt others. What we call 'culture' is a set of institutions and strategies for achieving the same feeling in a sublimated or less direct fashion. The most important strategies have involved directing the will to power back against the self. Such internalization is responsible for all the ethical achievements of humanity, all the ways in which human beings have changed and perfected their original nature by adopting a new and improved nature.¹⁶ In this context, radical practice becomes an active force that aims at suggesting new and better interpretations of the state of being.

The *will to criticize*, the second parameter, relates to the need for a judicial framework to the existing order: awareness of the implications of the above-mentioned active force. Radical practice within a socio-political context uses criticism for deconstruction (rather than negation), and this involves dismantling any hierarchal binary oppositions. It aims to identify 'blind spots' and unacknowledged assumptions or realities.

The *will to reform*, the third parameter, is

a product of the will to power and an outcome of criticism. It is endemic to the human need to reform, to renew, restore, re-establish. Radical practice *must* propose reformative actions, invited by some and imposed on others. As Jacques Derrida reminds us,¹⁷ the promise for change is the only thing that cannot be deconstructed. The power relations between groups influence both reformative actions and their outcomes. That is to say, the will to reform implies change that is not fully defined or predicted, but is a social framework in which new conventions and precedents can accelerate new ways of altering matters.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 59

The three parameters are essential, interconnected and inseparable, even though radical practice may also address other parameters. The context of radical practice is not merely *space* but also the concrete urban environment embedded in the complex relationship between capital and the state. Money, free market, and state are interdependent. Capital must cooperate with the state;¹⁸ the state has the monopoly of violence and law. The physical environment is where these dynamics take place and where architecture operates. It is also the context challenged by radical practice.

¹⁸ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 178

(2) Radical practice in the age of late capitalism

In the age of late capitalism radical practice is embedded in the utopian. What does utopia mean to society today? Is it at all significant? If the answer is negative, argues Fredric Jameson, it is due to the polarity between the two worlds of contemporary global order: the world of poverty, unemployment, violence and death, in which the idea of utopia seems irrelevant and frivolous; and the world of wealth and commercialization, in which these ideas seem outdated and boring.¹⁹ However, utopia is more than an idealized vision. It is a method of thinking through, of imaginatively challenging divisions and conventions, a place where we can address many of our daily struggles for existence.²⁰ It is also an

¹⁹ Frederick Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia", *New Left Review* 25 (2004), pp. 35-54.

²⁰ John Friedmann, "The Good City: in Defense of Utopian Thinking", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 24/2 (2000), pp. 460-472

strategies of thought and action.

Repression of the utopian discourse is partly a consequence of 20th century assessments of Utopia in terms of either success or failure. This, in addition to critical discourse on knowledge, power and truth²¹, has resulted in an acute separation between the lived experience and the imagined utopian space, accentuating what Bernard Tschumi called 'the architectural paradox'.²² Architecture could not reconcile its role of addressing the needs of everyday life with that of an abstract concept, disregarding the existing reality and attempting to create an alternative. This paradox is extremely evident in contemporary Israeli architectural discourse, which is currently polarized so that one group is committed to social change but ignores questions of form and material; while the other group is committed to technology, computation and morphology but avoids social issues. This extreme polarization has created a state of detachment and aridity: Theoretically, the first socially-oriented professionals are also able to operate beyond the boundaries of the discipline. The second group operates within the domain of spatial form, presenting a limited reading of the city and its inhabitants, and thus marginalizing architectural practice. At the end of the day, both groups are detached from the production of space at large, and do not significantly influence practice.

Reviving the utopian debate does not mean returning to spatial form as a tool for social change. It is a method of thinking and searching for alternatives to the free market. As Harvey puts it, without the utopian vision, capitalism produces landscapes appropriate to its own dynamics, which are destroyed and rebuilt over and over again.²³ This is particularly vital in contested zones, where perceiving political conflicts at national level, disconnected from local socio-spatial implications, all too often increases the capitalistic reality. An example of this could be seen in the discussions, exhibitions, and protests concerning the construction of the separation wall between Israel and Palestine.²⁴ These events were mere journalistic (i.e. documentary) episodes,

²¹ Michel Foucault, *The order of things; an archaeology of the human sciences* (New York: Vintage Books 1970); *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power." In Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds.) *Formations of Modernity* (London: Polity Press, 1992, 1993): 275-320; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

²² Bernard Tschumi, "The Architectural Paradox" [1975], Michael Hays (ed.), *Oppositions*, pp. 224-227

²³ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, (California: University of California Press, 2000).

²⁴ e.g. Sheli Cohen and Haim Yacobi (curators) *Separation*, Israeli Architectural Association Gallery (2005)

offering no alternatives or counter-plans, and as such they were merely items in the capitalist production of magazines, galleries and newspapers.

(3) Is there a radical practice in Israel?

Is there a practice that touches on the fundamental values of our society that can initiate new reforms or propose alternatives? According to the suggested definitions, the answer must be negative. Critical architectural debate, influenced by discourses in sociology and geography, is part of the local scene. Why is this discourse not translated into action? Further to the above (i.e. the implications of abandoning utopianism), the problem of Israeli architectural critical discourse is the contrast in the situation of the Palestinians and of the Israelis, the basis for all discussions. These binary oppositions, (occupier and occupied, guilty and just) in the everyday political reality, do not offer opportunities for considering the human society inhabiting this space, mutual patterns, similarities as well as differences. Thus, although they point out the limitations of current architectural discourse, the critical voices are unable to effect real change.

There is no doubt that architectural critical discourse in Israel has reinforced the social and political dimensions of the profession. But this contemporary discourse is detached from questions of spatial form. Lack of new spatial patterns is atrophying the logic of our profession, without them we operate ad hoc, ruled by both market and nationalist forces. How can we shift from a language of contrasts to a critical language that avoids comparisons? The only way is to suggest alternative methods that will be critical but at the same time constructive. Against the critical-passive discourse we must enhance the critical-active discourse. Thus, along with acknowledgment of the destruction caused by occupation, the violence and death, the mission of the professionals and the critics must be to look through a multicultural lens and initiate mutual socio-spatial patterns of humane and just environments for both peoples, Israelis and

palestinians. Utopian considerations may help us to understand not merely where we came from but also where we are going.

This issue of "Block" addresses the utopian as a concept comprising human multiplicity and social institutions without denying their identities. It does not present a unified agenda but rather a set of contradictory voices, and is composed of three interrelated layers: *utopian drawings* (generators), *utopian intentions* (interventions) and *utopian debate* (discourse).

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This volume is dedicated to Prof. Hubert Law-Yone, who taught me to acknowledge the value of doubt.