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On Life-Styles in Architecture, Asceticism and Lust

Pier Vittorio Aureli

An Interview by Klaus Platzgummer

Since summer 2014 Pier Vittorio Aureli is a visiting professor for Theory of Architecture at ETH Zurich. Klaus Platzgummer met him to discuss the contemporary condition in the production of architecture.

Klaus Platzgummer (kp): In your writings architecture is often related to political and economic theories and conditions. I was born in 1988, grew up in a society of growth and never really sensed a struggle between classes in society, for example between «workers» and «bourgeoisie». In reference to the present financial crisis you wrote in the essay «Less Is Enough», that some architects try to translate the ethos of austerity in formal terms, while others advocate a more socially minded approach.¹ Generally speaking, how would you describe the relation between architecture and the current economic condition?

Pier Vittorio Aureli (pva): First of all the history of capitalism is a history of crises. Capitalism evolves from crises, which are moments where capitalism restructures its modes of production by discharging its internal contradictions to the workers themselves. So, this is a very long history and the crisis we are living through is certainly not an exception. On the contrary, it is a condition embedded in the very logic of a capitalistic society. Specific to this crisis is, that today's capitalism does not have any

opposition. During the world economic crisis of 1929 or just a few years prior in the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, capitalism had a strong opposition from a well organised working class movement. This opposing force helped capital to get back on track and reconstruct its hegemonic power. Such strong pressures were used by capitalism to change and evolve its means of production. Today's problem is that there is no dialectic between capital and workers, because of the workers lack of political organisation. Paradoxically, this condition is not only bad for the workers, but also for capital, as it does not face the critical opposition it had in the past. In that sense, due to the lack in this kind of opposition, it is hard to understand in which ways architecture and any other intellectual discipline could propose an alternative to the existing condition.

kp: In «Project of Autonomy» you mention several projects by Aldo Rossi and Archizoom, related to the economic crises in the 1960s. You came to the conclusion that they intended to construct a new political subject: «This subject was intended to replace the institutions of capitalism and even those of liberal democracy»². Do you not see a similar tendency today?

pva: No, not with the same intensity in which it happened back then. But there are

new movements, such as housing co-operatives, which are trying to reinvent a form of political subjectivity within and against neoliberal capital.³ I think and hope that in future this subjectivity will be stronger than it is today. Today it is still relatively weak because it suffers from the total fragmentation through which labour and work have been organised within contemporary forms of production. Today, the right to unionise, which protected architects and graphic designers in the past from being exploited, no longer exists: we have no sociopolitical protection against exploitation. Maybe with the exception of Switzerland, Europe's welfare system has been dismantled.

kp: Especially in housing you show relation between economy and architectural production. For example you criticise how housing became a question of representation and housing is not primarily sold as a accommodation but more as a life-style.⁴ What is the role of architecture?

pva: Capital is a system of relationships. Its constructed ideology plays a fundamental role. We can only construct this apparatus if these relationships are not just normal relationships, but also imply ideological projections. This ideological projections use images, scenarios and imagination in order to materialise. The function of ideology



fig. a
 Jon Naar, *Andy Warhol on Red Sofa*, 1965.
 Photograph: Jon and Alex Naar, Trenton.

is to materialise these aspirations and desires by giving them an image. Of course, architecture, but also art and other activities provide that kind of material; consider the images architecture has produced of cities, and domestic spaces. Here, architecture has become the imagination of how we desire certain ways of living and modes of life.

kp: One mode of life and its relation to architecture you recently addressed is asceticism.⁵ Where and when did this relationship become apparent?

pva: The word asceticism originally means 'to train oneself' and the first ascetics were philosophers. Philosophers were not only supposed to theorise an idea of life, but also to live accordingly. So asceticism is a moment in which you become aware of your own life and it starts from very banal aspects, like how to structure your daily existence. This developed as a conscious project with the rise of monasticism. Monks not only worship, but in order to worship they organise their entire existence, following a very defined pattern, where production becomes not only production of objects, but production of life itself. Monasticism is a form of existence in which life itself is performed as a very specific form of life. So for me the architecture of the monastery is the very first archetype: not only of asceticism as a form of life, but also of

a productive life. A productive life has to be strictly organised according to spaces, programs and schedules. For instance the development of clocks and bells is a phenomenon that emerged with monasteries, where time has become a way to organise life itself. I argue in *Less Is Enough* that the prehistory of asceticism has changed from a very deliberately accepted form of life to the rise of industrialisation and modernity. This kind of condition has become something much more general. Think of the importance of schedules, the importance of programs: these things of our life define a constant pattern of deadlines and deliveries. It is no longer a self chosen form of life, but rather an imposed form and constantly articulated by production.

kp: In the contemporary architectural production asceticism gets aestheticised as a lifestyle.⁶ Why do you see this as problematic?

pva: This is because it fetishises a condition that is increasingly problematic. An example is the rise of domesticity of the workplace. You see in a lot of contemporary design in which work no longer corresponds to a very dry, ascetic office environment. More and more the office resembles a fancy place. It is a sort of naturalisation of work. Here design provides a very strategic ideological representation of contemporary forms of pro-

duction. In the last few decades, labour has exponentially increased and we tend to work all the time. When I talk about work I mean the moment we produce values. Comparing my workday to my father's or grandfather's, I see that the boundary between life and work has completely disappeared, to the point where I don't know exactly when my work stops and I do other things. The downside of this condition is of course that our wages have been reduced dramatically because it is easy to lower them when the distinction between work and non-work no longer exists. Design is very strategic because it provides images and representations of the city, the house or the workplace, which tend to completely delude the traditional image of production. Other examples are these big lounges at the universities; for example at the 'Rolex Learning Center' where we don't feel we are working, and yet we are. Even innocent activities, like this interview or any conversation, are work and non work. Architecture of course provides an ambience and an image. I do not criticise the 'Rolex Learning Center' project itself. I am critical of this image of learning it transports. Learning, in the end, is a form of production, while when laying down on the 'Learning Center's' pillows, the idea of learning as a fundamental productive process is mystified. Anything seems to be detached from labour and exploitation.

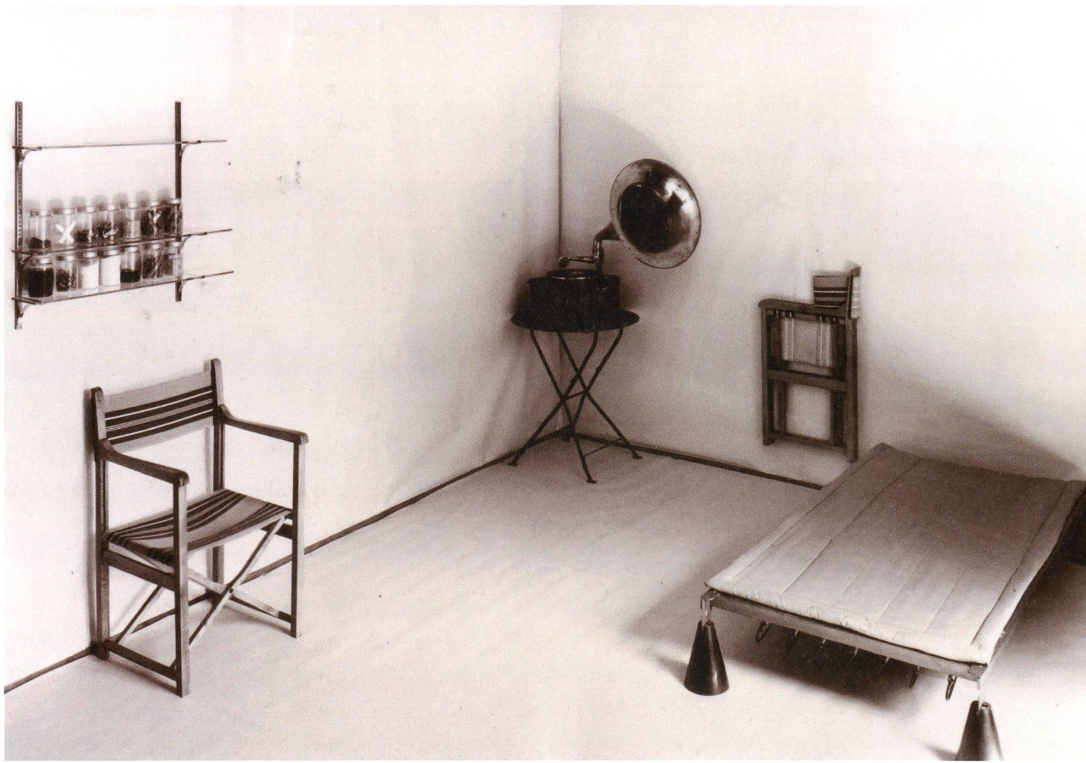


fig. b
Hannes Meyer, 'Zimmer Co-op', 1924.
Photograph: Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

kp: The topic of the upcoming issue of 'trans magazine' is the ambiguous term 'Lust'. In German it is generally defined as a sort of desire, which is primarily driven by the idea to fulfill one's wishes, and only secondarily emphasises sexual desires. Generally it is a feeling that can be produced when I fulfill my wishes. Lastly it also satisfies our wishes through asceticism. What is the relevance of 'Lust' in our contemporary architectural production?

pva: It is a very difficult issue because I think these terms have been banalised so much today. We might even lack a clear concept of the idea of fulfillment of a wish, perhaps because we live in a situation where this fulfillment never happens. Our desires and frustrations are steadily prolonged, in order to keep us running. The moment we are able to fulfill a wish is the moment we stop. Good asceticism is a condition in which you fulfill this wish, that has nothing to do with common forms of fulfillment (a career, a success or whatever) but is something that is more self-constructed. And then there is bad asceticism, which is almost self-punishment: you constrain yourself in order to take part in this kind of race, the end of which you never reach.

Today that is how many architects, practitioners or generally people within the creative

industry sacrifice themselves and destroy their existence completely. The amount of time, energy, frustration and depression that is spent to achieve self-imposed goals is an incredibly high price, compared to its value after the fulfillment. So within this condition, I think it is very difficult to talk about lust, especially when these conditions are too easily materialised in consumer images. Take for example a villa overlooking the Alps, or these kinds of cliché ideas of a type of hedonism. These images are fetishised and obstruct us from seeing the real problem.

kp: Here again economy is using images and in this case these are images of 'Lust'.

pva: Yes.

kp: I brought three photos with me, which show the 'Factory' by Andy Warhol (fig. a), the 'Co-op Zimmer' by Hannes Meyer (fig. b) and 'A view from an Apartment' taken by Jeff Wall (fig. c). By unifying work and living Andy Warhol tries to fulfill his wish...

pva: This is a very interesting comparison. Andy Warhol's 'Factory' is an ambience where even lust has been totally absorbed by the ethos of production. Even fun and relaxation are part of an incessant mode of production. The 'Factory' by Andy Warhol is a place where the whole spectrum of social

relationships is basically condensed in one space. Live production of art encounters meeting, exchange and rest. In the case of Andy Warhol, life itself is concentrated in one space. Conversely to Warhol, Hannes Meyer reduces the individual's space to the bare minimum. This does not mean that he imposes poverty on the inhabitants; it simply secures a space to rest and have moments of disconnection or seclusion. All the other programs or functions are outside and shared. I see this as a true image of 'Lust' or rather here the idea of lust is not obvious, while in Andy Warhol's 'Factory' the idea of 'Lust' is too obvious and fetishised.

kp: And when we add the photo of Jeff Wall, where would you place it?

pva: It is an in-between image, because in a way Jeff Wall's photograph does not really fetishise the incessant modes of production. While one woman is working, the other is relaxing. But there is reciprocity between them and maybe there is a friendship or a sense of solidarity. Here, the house is a place of production as well as a space of exchange, which is beyond production, and in that sense the fact that the room overlooks the port is another really interesting aspect in this image. Ports are usually places of production. Therefore, the image implies a striking contrast between the house and



fig. c
 Jeff Wall, *A View from an Apartment*, 2004–2005.
 Photograph: Tate, London.

this very heavy landscape. I find this image to be transitional, a very interesting in-between.

kp: Another point of reference for you is the Israeli artist Absalon. You wrote about his projects in *‘Less Is Enough’*⁷. Of course his work is strongly related to the idea of asceticism and in the end also to *‘Lust’*. Absalon’s spatial objects in his exhibitions, are so that they are not lacking physical space even if they are small. Do you follow this strategy in your own projects with *‘Dogma’*?

pva: Yes, because for me the reason why these minimal dwellings are not small in the end, is because they were not supposed to be places where you would spend all your existence. Their smallness implied that most of the inhabitant’s existence would be spent outside. Absalon would actually use this minimal dwelling only as a kind of individual refuge and in that sense they are not small. Absalon’s spaces only serve the basic functions of life: reproduction. And I like this idea that they are that small and so they can be placed both inside or outside existing structures.

kp: Absalon wrote about his work: *‘I desire a self-contained universe [...] But the difference between me and someone who wants to change everything is that I like*

*change for the sake of change and not for improvement. Contrary to the revolutionary, I have no need to justify my dream for change. I put a wild energy into the creation of something new, not of something better.’*⁸ Where would you position your practice?

pva: First of all, I am an architect like anybody else and certainly not a revolutionary one. I don’t want to put my discourse within these terms. It is a fundamental mistake to even frame the discussion in these terms. I think what we can do is very limited, but that does not mean that we accept the limits as they are. Of course we all try to find margins, even for the smallest kind of change, for what we believe is *‘better’*. So, I think there is a principle of hope that exists in any activity, even the most compromised one. And let’s say my attempt is to use that principle as much as possible, but I would certainly not pretend that my work or writings can put forward a revolutionary architecture. I think at the moment you just mention these terms; again, you create a fetish from which no change can be achieved. We should not give up accepting reality as it is. To jump to another extreme, which is to claim utopian messianic revolution is a fundamental demagogic claim that I not only do not support, but do not think my work is about.

- 1 Pier Vittorio Aureli, *‘Less is Enough’*, Moscow: Strelk Press 2013, p. 4.
- 2 Pier Vittorio Aureli, *‘The Project of Autonomy’*, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press 2013, p. 79.
- 3 see also: Pier Vittorio Aureli, Martino Trattara, *‘Tower and Plinth – Proposal for affordable housing in the Merihaka district, Helsinki’*, 2014.
- 4 Pier Vittorio Aureli, Martino Trattara, *‘DOGMA - 11 Projects’*, London: AA Publications 2013, p. 89.
- 5 Pier Vittorio Aureli, *‘Less is Enough’*, Moscow: Strelk Press 2013.
- 6 Ibid, p.26.
- 7 Pier Vittorio Aureli, *‘Less is Enough’*, Moscow: Strelk Press 2013, p. 33ff. and Pier Vittorio Aureli, public lecture *‘Living & Working – How to live together’*, ETH Zurich, 27.11.2014.
- 8 CREDAC – Centre d’Art Contemporain, *‘La casa, il corpo, il cuore – Konstruktion der Identitäten’*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stift 1999, p. 194 and Philippe Vergne, *‘Absalon: The Man without a Home is a Potential Criminal’*, p. 5, www.anticlimacus.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/absalon-philippevergne.pdf, retrieved: 10.12.2014.

Pier Vittorio Aureli, born 1973, studied at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia and later at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam. Aureli teaches at the AA School of Architecture in London and is visiting professor at ETH Zurich and Yale University.

Klaus Platzgummer, born 1988, studies architecture, history of art and philosophy at ETH Zurich and the University of Basel. He worked for the Swiss Pavillon of La Biennale in Venice and as an agent at gta exhibitions.