CONJURING UTOPIA’S GHOST

REINHOLD MARTIN

INTERVIEWED BY JONATHAN CRISMAN
Jonathan Crisman

Your book Utopia’s Ghost builds on and, in some sense, attempts to supersede and re-synthesize much of what might be considered “canonical” scholarship on postmodernism within architecture—I’m thinking of Jameson, Jencks, and so forth. Does this re-working of existing scholarship—what some might perceive as a subtle attack—come out of a perceived need for a newly performative understanding of postmodernism, the desire to construct a contemporary project in a disciplinary landscape of post-criticality, or something else entirely?

Reinhold Martin

Well, I would say that the book’s approach is fairly straightforward. It had always seemed to me that there was a distinction to be made between theories of cultural postmodernism and the architectural discourse gathered together under the same name. So first, we must differentiate emphatically between Jameson and Jencks. It is unfortunate that Jameson and others had to rely on Jencks as a source for postmodernist “theory” in architecture, though Jencks particularly suits Jameson’s symptomatic reading. The resulting characterization of architectural works and writings from the 1970s and 1980s as clear-cut symptoms of postmodern dissolution remains quite revealing; nevertheless, it is somewhat premature.


2 This exchange between Reinhold Martin and Jonathan Crisman occurred via email over a period from January 25, 2011 to May 26, 2011 predating a variety of current events that could relate to notions of “conjuring Utopia’s ghost,” not the least of which is the Occupy Wall Street movement.


Jc

Historically, this has to do in part with the troubled afterlife of architectural modernism within many so-called postmodernist works. This is one of several intended meanings of the book’s title. Without belaboring the point, my overall argument implies that architecture has only belatedly become “postmodern.” Only today, when it is widely assumed that the affectations of that period have been left behind in favor of a more future-oriented perspective, can we say that architecture has acquired a full complement of properly postmodern characteristics. Especially in the sense that today’s various modernist revivals have finally succeeded in exorcising Utopia’s ghost—almost. That is partly what I mean by insisting that postmodernism is not a style but a discursive formation: a way of speaking about the world and a way of acting in it that makes certain statements possible while excluding others by making them, in effect, unthinkable. Among the latter is Utopia not in the sense of an ideal world, but in the sense of systemic change.

The book’s project is therefore trans-disciplinary. It is not merely about architecture and its endgames, or even ways out of those endgames. Instead, I argue that disciplinary knowledge, and the internal debates that structure this knowledge, offers a productive entry point into much more broadly defined problems. So the book offers an architectural theory that is also a form of theory qua theory—that is, a type of discourse that moves across the humanities and social sciences while retaining its particular referent, hence recognizing (indeed, requiring) the specificity of individual disciplines.

So the idea of learning to live with Utopia’s ghost—allowing the specter of “systemic change” to live among us—is one you argue would be beneficial for not only architecture, but cultural practice in general and, perhaps, even society at large? If this is so, one such “diviner” might be the Yes Men and their art practice of large-scale pranks that imagine a different world—say, one in which Dow would repair the damage done by Union Carbide in Bhopal, a topic also covered.
in *Utopia’s Ghost* regarding the subject of postmodern architecture. Are there other such successful diviners that come to mind?

**RM**

The chapter in the book that deals with the architecture of Union Carbide in relation to the biopolitics of the Bhopal event was meant to demonstrate certain types of discursive connections through which power flows. Though provocative, one unintended consequence of the intervention by the Yes Men was that some Bhopal victims and their relatives were misled into believing that their claims had been settled. After all, one does not simply speak on behalf of others in unproblematic ways. So yes, agit-prop art practice can be effective in identifying a crisis, pointing out hypocrisy, and even transforming expectations. But I don’t think that any one approach adequately matches the scale of challenge. Systemic change is just that—systemic. And in order to think it, you have to have something like a map of the system. That is what I have tried to provide.

It is a truism to say that the contemporary world system is composed of linkages and connections. What might be less evident is the nature of the power networks that, in this case, connect Bhopal, India to Danbury, Connecticut. The relations are not causal or linear; the architecture of Union Carbide’s Danbury headquarters did not produce the gas leak. But it contributed to far-reaching networks of subject formation. These networks helped to maintain an international division of labor predicated on the unequal value of “life” in different but mutually dependent accounting regimes. That is why the chapter is about computation, in the end.

To your question, then, of other resistant practices—yes, they abound. That is not the problem. The problem is that the fragile solidarities between regimes of knowledge and practice that would enable a scaling up of alternatives have become largely unthinkable. Imagine today demanding that the state—any state—adequately house its population. This kind of demand may seem hopelessly naïve in a neoliberal age. Housing, one of modern architecture’s core problems, has become almost the sole province of the markets, assisted by the state. Or, such a demand may seem pater-nalistic. After all, the welfare state, so well-serviced by architectural modernism, was also a laboratory for working out the sorts of biopolitical protocols and techniques that have since been taken over by multinational capital to administer the global lifeworld. And yet, what we need is the intelligence and imagination to work out systemic alternatives to the status quo. Architecture can help with that, rather directly, by demonstrating possibilities that operate on different premises than those operating a hegemonic system of systems in which life and death are variables in a great game.

**JC**

Let’s return to housing. In the final chapter of your book, you begin by calling for the revisiting of the “housing question.”

Similarly, in a recent lecture, you called for the reinsertion of the “public” in public housing. Though the notion of demanding the state to adequately house its population is ridiculous in that it illuminates the state’s inability to do so and, simultaneously, “hopelessly naïve” within a neoliberal framework, it appears to be precisely the type of “unthinkable” thought that the conjuring of *Utopia’s* ghost entails. In a parallel train of thought, on the topic of mapping power flows in relation to Union Carbide, your larger narrative appeared to be about the shift from a modern “population” subject toward a postmodern “mass

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4 The Yes Men, posing as representatives from Dow Chemical in 2004, distributed a fictitious press release that took responsibility for the disaster in Bhopal and offered reparations for the damage done by Union Carbide. This caused a subsequent $2 billion dip in Dow’s stock, forcing the company to rescind the press release, emphatically stating that they did not take any responsibility for the disaster and would have no part in reparations. See http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/bbcbbhopal.


customized individual” subject. Could you elaborate on who—or what—might compose the “public” in a newly conceived visit to “public housing” and map its topology in relation to the shifting form of the subject?

RM

It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that public or social housing and the programs and policies supporting it were a sine qua non of modern architecture in Europe, Latin America, parts of Asia, and to a lesser extent, the United States. That is one reason why the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex in St. Louis in 1972 was received so symbolically by postmodernists. Yes, there were massive, complex problems. But the seemingly incessant repetition of that image, of a “public’s” housing being demolished, and the smug pleasure so many have covertly derived from it, is one of the aesthetic obscenities of our time. It even became national policy in the HOPE VI public housing demolition program, which reflects the influence of the New Urbanism. Still, even in 1972, it did not seem at all ridiculous to expect the state to take responsibility for housing its population, despite the evident failures. That thought only became widely accepted later, with the definitive waning of the welfare state, as the narratives driving privatization were naturalized.

I am not suggesting that the modern welfare state was some kind of utopia. On the contrary, as so much critical social thought has demonstrated, state-based programs for the care and management of populations were notorious disciplinary sites. From housing to prisons to schools to hospitals, such sites were recognized as arenas for the reproduction of institutionalized norms that managed desire, suppressed dissent, and propagated a whole host of unfreedoms. Still all of these institutions, distant progeny of the Western Enlightenment, remain contested sites for the enactment of social justice, as the debates over universal health coverage in the United States have testified. So in that sense, public, or social, housing is fraught with ambivalence and contradiction.

Most notably, this architectural “type,” one of the great—if problematic—innovations of modernism, is haunted by a utopian aspiration that is not reducible to neoliberal shibboleths like “public-private partnerships,” which is an oxymoron when viewed from a perspective that emphasizes conflicts between nominally public and private interests rather than some mystical synthesis. The terms “public” and “private” are themselves artifacts of a modernist sensibility that is clearly inadequate to describe contemporary realities. Yet such apparently outmoded terminology highlights the cultural narratives and norms that are inseparable from these realities. To insist on reimagining public housing is therefore to insist on retaining the category of the public, and with it of collectivity more generally (others speak of a “commons”), as a locus for the development of counternarratives and with them, new mixtures of politics and practice.

Which brings us to the second part of your question. Rather than being outmoded under postmodernity, the modernist public, with its connotations of universality and standardization, has been multiplied, made plural. But this new plurality brings its own dilemmas, not the least of which is its proximity to the forms of life elicited by mass-customized consumerism. Here, the standardization of the modernist masses is replaced by a sort of micro-individuation, whereby subjectivity is divided internally along potentially conflicting lines of desire. Rather than being liberating, the ever-expanding rainbow of choices enabled by mass customization represents a new turn of the historical screw. Its corporate master signifier is Apple instead of IBM. Which, again, is not to say that liberation cannot be sought in digitally produced forms of differentiation, only that these techniques tend to reproduce hegemonic narratives and practices, such as those that oppose the individual to the collective rather than seeing individuality as a function of collectivity. It would be quite different to think of the hyper-individuated postmodern subject as inherently collective, bound by solidarities of various kinds, rather than as a sort of
meta-consumer. Imagined as a new public for public housing, this collective would emphatically include those who do not live there, as well as those who do.

JC

The hegemonic narratives and practices that you mention are curious in that they oppose the individual to the collective while simultaneously espousing ideals of individualism at the expense of the collective. As Dolores Hayden is fond of pointing out, every owner of a single family home is, in fact, a recipient of government-subsidized housing—the subsidy is simply once removed through tax credits rather than the directly provided through housing projects. The notion of imagining a new public as part and parcel of rethinking public housing seems to be crucial for moving beyond the narratives that perpetuate these sorts of practices.

Now, in *Utopia’s Ghost*, you discuss the mirror in depth—as a feedback loop, as a medium for revealing and obscuring the specters of Utopia, and, perhaps most importantly, as the paradigmatic object of postmodern architecture. Similarly, you discuss the liberation found in seeing the mirror, itself, rather than the image that it contains. Can we facilitate this act of seeing or should we, in fact, eschew the mirror altogether?

RM

It is ironic to think that one can discuss mirrors “in depth,” as you say, but that is indeed what I have tried to do. But I don’t really want to suggest to architects what they should or should not do with mirrors. I only want to suggest that this eminently enigmatic material (thinking of a mirror more as material than as object) deserves a closer look. So the question becomes: how to look at a mirror, rather than in it.

The mirror also poses certain historical questions that double back onto the present. *Utopia’s Ghost* does not narrate a history; instead, it asks us to think and work historically when we write our history books or, for that matter, when we do anything else. In part, it is addressed to those scholars who have now begun to rewrite the history of architectural postmodernism in its many aspects. It urges them to find ways of taking into account their own historical position. I know that some already have. But what will it take for “postmodern architecture” to be historicized in a way that thoroughly denaturalizes the cavalier attitude toward history that is among its defining characteristics? It will be insufficient to demystify its misnamed “historicism.” Nor will it be adequate to apologize for its supposed formalism. Nor, finally, will it be convincing to break it down into its constituent parts and deal with them one by one without reference to larger processes, or simply to ignore the whole thing entirely in favor of some supposedly less treacherous alternative.

I deliberately refer to postmodernism as something like a monolith here, not because anything like that has ever actually existed, but as a way of naming its hegemonic character as a discourse. Postmodernism, understood as a discursive formation, was and remains the name we can give—with all due apology for its reductiveness—to the congeries of cultural practices that step outside of history in order to evade its challenges. By stepping outside of history, I mean backing oneself into a corner, stripped of political agency and left only with a historical imagination grasping at straws, scouring the recent past for overlooked clues, underappreciated precedents, rather than looking right there on the surface of things. And, again ironically, sometimes the best way to evade the challenges of history is to write history books.

Among the questions posed by the mirror is that of writing a materialist history of so-called dematerialization, including the dematerialization of “the public,” which is one of postmodernism’s alleged hallmarks. I have tried to suggest that, though this question can return into the chambers of historical materialism through the back door, it also

opens onto other, perhaps less teleological, pathways. Consider the mirror’s materiality, its manipulation of light, as a sort of archetypal feedback loop. Interpreting such a loop as a paradigm of historicity, of this-then-that-then-this-then-that, would mean overturning (or transvaluing) the whole set of values associated with transparency—whether optical, cognitive, or spatial—that channel the historical imagination down a one way street, from here to there, from this to that, and replacing them with a new set.

One way to see this is to look at materiality itself. Glass is not exactly transparent. Nor is its materiality restricted to what is actually visible. Likewise for mirrors, which are not entirely opaque. Similarly, I have tried to show that what we call oil is also an elusive complex of material relationships, some of which interact with supposedly more architectural materials like mirrored glass. We can extend such an inquiry further, into the historical afterlife of transparent glass, by asking: What does transparency do today? It divides, repels, excludes just as often as it welcomes, opens out, or includes. That is, it mirrors. Think of all the borderlines that are marked with transparent glass or something like it, as if to say, “welcome” even as the actual message to those defined as non-belonging, conveyed by microphysical control mechanisms like passwords, card readers, or surveillance cameras, is unambiguously “keep out.”

Such double binds are basic to the type of historical experience we call postmodern. Mirrored glass enacts transparency as a sort of paradox. Like the whole host of “postmodern” architectural devices with which it combines, mirrored glass does not hide anything. Nor does it mislead, except in helping to produce what I would call the illusion that there is an illusion—the illusion that what you’re looking at or thinking about is not real. But it is real, as real as the resulting double bind, which collapses reality and illusion, and with these, freedom and unfreedom, into a single surface, a sort of closed loop. Unraveling such binds is the principal challenge faced by historical work on the recent past today.

JC

As a final question, I wonder if you could relate this materiality—and, indeed, the paradoxical historical construction of “postmodernism”—back to the notion of a “plural public.” It seems as though this concept may shed light on one means to unravel these problematic loops.

RM

Yes, we should certainly avoid idealizing “the” public. We are all split, inside and out. And setting aside such idealizations can certainly mean multiplying the body politic or pluralizing the public. But neither is postmodern pluralism—to each their own—an acceptable alternative. Not only are material resources unevenly distributed across any such plurality. As I have tried to show by recontextualizing mass customization, apparently benign pluralism or multi-culturalism is often configured around power differentials that, for many, are matters of life and death. So the more urgent question may be one of how to form solidarities across such divides without presuming the a priori existence of something like shared values or even shared interests.

This is quite a burden to place on architecture. It may even be too much to ask of the historical interpretation of architecture, or of any other cultural processes for that matter. But architecture is an important mediator; you can look at any building and learn something about the world that it imagines, so to speak. In other words, architecture helps to structure the social imagination. That means that we should be able to analyze any building in terms of the publics, counterpublics, or other collectivities that it anticipates or makes visible, as well as those that it implicitly brackets out.

So when we speak about architecture’s materiality, we are actually speaking about a set of mediating infrastructures, artifacts, and processes. These include but are not limited to the materials from which a building is assembled, the economic factors and systems of production that shape it, the social bodies that pass through it, and so on. But I want to end on what may seem a counterintuitive
note, by emphasizing the need to take formal properties into account as well. Form is not a matter of ideology, as is so often said of architectural postmodernism's language games. Nor does it reflect the autonomy of aesthetic practices. On the contrary, in architecture, form is a precondition for politico-economic immanence; it is among architecture's ways of being in the world. As a discourse, architecture mediates social and economic relations by translating or transcoding them into formal equivalents. Analyze these forms and you are analyzing the world.

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