For an Architecture of Radical Democracy

Any viable political project in architecture today must contend with the idea and practices of radical democracy. At a time of global socio-political and economic upheaval, the architectural profession, like other collectives, seeks models and institutions that will allow it to address its grievances as part of this upheaval. The particular fallout within architecture are multiple and well-known: high rates of un- or under-employment, low and unequal pay and fees, terrible work-life balance, mountains of student debt, lack of access for minorities, and a lack of socially-rewarding and meaningful projects to work on, among others.

While architecture has typically shrugged off these social issues as largely exogenous to the discipline, a growing number of practitioners and theorists have come to appreciate these political realities directly through their work experiences as architects, not as parallel or external to it. Hence we see the awkward manoeuvres of conservative architectural institutions like the AIA to try and cover their crisis of legitimacy (catalysed, most recently, by their infamous reaction to Donald Trump’s infrastructural plans) through ineffective and superficial “reports,” “listening rounds,” and other recuperative strategies of corporate “inclusion.”

Rather than dealing with these structural problems in a remedial and patchwork fashion, the moment demands a more systematic analysis—in effect, an effort to align the realities of architecture today with the discourses and practices of progressive politics at large. What are their relations, if any, and how might they suggest more effective models of political agency for architecture?

The concept of “radical democracy,” first theorised by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau in their seminal 1985 book, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics, offers enlightening approaches to this question. It is enlightening because it re-focuses Marxist critique for the current economic regime under explicitly postmodern conditions and it is applicable because it offers a scalable model for how architecture and architectural work can be rethought in this context.

We argue that any progressive political activism within (and without) architecture must contend with radical democracy’s insights if it wants to address architecture’s structural problems. Radical democracy offers a viable understanding of the relation between architecture as an actor within civil society and the state, and processes of social change.

This essay will fall into two parts: reviewing some of the main ideas of radical democracy and considering them in relation to architecture and architectural work.

Radical Democracy

Radical democracy, while emergent from Marxist discourse, is fundamentally at odds with a number of classical Marxist tenets. The central idea of “revolution” as a transcendental break with the past, the privileged role of the working class as the agent of historical change, and the ascendency of economics over any other social determination, are critically re-conceptualised. As a theory, radical democracy attempts to understand the “ontology of the social” while rejecting the truisms of essentialist models that en-shrine any social order as natural or inevitable. In a critically post-modern fashion, Laclau and Mouffe break with the modern social science idea that “the social” can be represented in its totality, as something objective and external—in effect, challenging both classic Marxist orthodoxy (that would see the world as a primarily economic structure totalized by capital-as a mode of production) as well as liberal political philosophy (that would see the market as a natural reality stemming from individual’s natural preferences and requiring only procedural tweaks in purely technical terms). Arguing that there is simply no outside to the social itself—no privileged vantage point from which to formulate a total perspective on it—Laclau and Mouffe propose that culture replaces structure as the chief mediating agent of the social.

This cultural versus structural description of society attempts to reckon with identifications that are not just economically illogical, but often contradictory. Yet such identifications may produce contingent alliances that can enlist different actors (with divergent interests) into a common project, at least for a determined period of time. In this sense, it is a non-teleological theory of social change—pragmatic and instrumental rather than historically deterministic. It also rethink class, in as much the “working class” is displaced from its position as singular agent of historical change, with a definition that relies on fluid identities and power relations dependent on a given moment’s correlation of socio-political forces. Building on the work of Antonio Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe theorise class as embedded in the importance of moral and intellectual influence, including the integration of extra-class values, habits, and narratives as the foundations of political struggle. In short, they claim, ideas and practices are understood as an “organic and relational whole, embodied in institutions and apparatuses” rather than reflecting only structures of production.

2. For important challenges to Laclau and Mouffe’s post-structuralist framework, which we have attempted to incorporate in what follows, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, The Material From Class: A New True Socialist (London: Verso, 1985); For an influential history of the relations between post-structuralist and Marxist theories, see Perry Anderson, The Tracks of Historical Materialism (London: Verso, 1983).

3. Laclau and Mouffe’s framework is based on Antonio Gramsci’s theorization of hegemony, in which cultural relations are attributed a more important role than in purely economic Marxist models. Through a layered political, economic, and cultural reading, Gramsci explains why certain social actors do not identify as “working class” and act against their own material interests. Hegemony is the term that Gramsci gives to a process of identity formation where culture plays an outsized role in cultivating consent across groups with different interests; it does not negate the role of economic relations, but incorporates them into a new interpretative synthesis. See, Antonio Gramsci: Selected from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (New York: Random House International, 1991).


5. Ibid., 80.

6. Ibid., 82.

7. Ibid., 88.

8. Ibid., 84.
The theory of radical democracy seeks to give these endless (cultural) struggles an appropriate (cultural, political, and economic) outlet that will displace violence in favour of more democratic forms of action—what Mouffe would subsequently theorize further as “democratic agonism.” Thus, if liberal democracy is predicated on an equality of opportunities guaranteed (in theory, if never fully in practice) by a system of rights under a free market, radical democracy is predicated on an equality of access to the political process, expansively understood. No longer seeking a unified “people” (the working class, the nation, the party) led by a self-selected avant-garde or charismatic leader, cultural claims, rights, and property become subject to political deliberation—not just through the “official” channels of parliaments but also through the regulation of markets and the cultural mediations of civil society.

The opportunity to change current practices lies, according to Laclau and Mouffe, in two interrelated aspects: (1) the radical enfranchisement of actors within the democratic process at every level of society—through transparency, participatory modes of engagement, and access to political infrastructures; and (2) a constant search for new strategies to redirect the agency of fluid identity formations towards a democratic project with a new set of (adl)emocratic public sphere in order to forge a new (yet unrealizable) “cultural mediations of civil society.”

Indeed, neoliberal policies have increasingly unhinged social identities from their historical, material, and political articulations and turned the very constitution of identity into a market contest. Thus, for example, instead of feminist claims radically disrupting a heteropatriarchal form of social organization, in the corporate sector they tend to conform to preferential equivalences between the sexual and the economic. If all political struggles can be reduced to individual and incommensurable claims, there can be no aggregate group interests of any durability, and hence, no alternative hegemonic project. The question for an updated radical democracy therefore now becomes: how to redirect the agency of fluid identity formations away from the reinforcement of capitalism and towards a democratic project with a new set of real, material institutions?

The answer involves three steps: (1) bringing back the structural analysis of capitalism; (2) establishing new connections and systems of representation between social, juridical, economic, and political institutions; and (3) creating an aesthetic—rather than purely economic—discourse of labor that understands the co-dependent character of class and culture in the twenty-first century.

Radical Democracy and Neoliberalism

The principles given here by Laclau and Mouffe, written over thirty years ago, predate economic and political events that reflect the full blush of present-day neoliberalism. Advanced neoliberalism exacerbates the struggles previously identified in the critique of late capitalisms—the coercions of anti-labor policies, austerity, the shrinking of the welfare state, the establishment of a markedly pro-business political framework (from free trade agreements to financial de-regulation to oligopolistic wars), the marketization of social identities—but these struggles are now masked ever more by an economic-cultural discourse of individualism, innovation, creativity, DIY, and start-ups that seems to reward “self-realization” in the name of market “disruption.” In reality, these illusory self-empowering paradigms operate as coercive mechanisms (“Be creative! Or else... lose your job, health care, etc.”) that fulfill the anti-democratic requirements of finance capital and neoliberal globalization.

Radical Democracy

While a few large firms compete globally for the small pie business of iconic projects, this zero-sum model of architectural innovation leaves the vast majority of places, regions, and architectural firms mired in disinvestment. Always at the edge of economic relevance, architects have thus been distanced by this geopolitical-economic model from participating in the activities that actually matter: creating “public” spaces that are truly public; housing for all; quality infrastructure; and democratically zoned urban, suburban, and rural networks. As cities vie for the scarce capital available for public goods, a race-to-the-bottom logic extends throughout community building: private real estate has taken over when public policy (with some civic pride) should rule; in environmental impact, ecological integrity has been lost to the economic interests of markets; technology has made the connection to actual agents of production—contractors, subcontractors, laborers, fabricators, working drawing specialists—remote and abstract; architectural competitions for iconic symbols of entry into the global market reward architects chosen for their branding capacities rather than their social commitment or expertise.

Radical democracy offers different approaches to deliberating, analysing, and mobilizing architectural responses to all of these conditions. In part, this involves promoting alternative financial strategies that look beyond neoliberalism itself, pushing to abandon both capitalist globalization and nationalist isolationism in favor of a more just redistribution of international wealth and access to resources. Such a geopolitical reorientation could repurpose the global glut of savings accumulated since the 2008 financial crisis, directing capital towards public goods, and investing in meaningful work, health, education, and green technologies. It also, at an architectural level, is the responsibility of all architectural actors to first stress that architecture as a discipline is indeed in the world. This means marginalizing discourses of autonomy or narrow interests in style and analysing what structures of ideology make architecture susceptible to these seducing narratives. For academics, this means teaching architecture in the context of geopolitical, economic, and cultural history. For practitioners, this means an embrace of, as opposed to an in-difference to, the non-architectural agents with whom we necessarily interact. Our contracts could be written in such a way that contractors are not pitted against architects (and both against owners) and contractors—workers are not pitted against architects (and both against owners)—and contractors, subcontractors, laborers, fabricators, working drawing specialists—remote and abstract; architectural competitions for iconic symbols of entry into the global marketreward architects chosen for their branding capacities rather than their social commitment or expertise.

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sign, attempting to think and frame all scales of architectural work in the context of infrastructure—in physical, economic, social and financial terms.

For environmentalism, radical democracy requires a refusal to operate under the unsustainable capitalist “green-washing” models that currently serve national hegemonic imperatives, ensuring that all those affected by global warming—big and small nations, powerful and disenfranchised institutions—have full access to information and meaningful participation in shaping policy. This, in turn, requires architects to promote communal organizations at the local level to combat predatory development, and to push for publically-controlled and self-managed data systems to empower and aid coordinated modes of growth.

In other words, the turn from a geopolitical “war of all against all,” to a more integrated and sustainable system requires an embrace of new technologies—open source designs, 3-D printing, robotics, additive manufacturing, artificial intelligence, drones, etc. Architectural experimentation must stop lamenting a lost era of “authentic” craft and start using data-driven design to foster platforms of cooperation and collaboration rather than capitalist competition. Yet rather than constructing “private cities” of an alarmist and apocalyptic sort, an activist, “radical democratic approach to which most architectural institutions tacitly subscribe), a radical democratic approach to cyber-physical systems such as smart grids, virtual power plants, smart homes, intelligent transportation, and infrastructure cities as integrated components of a new international socialism.

In other words, we have to invent, not merely seize, new means of production, putting the funding and management of “innovations” under radically democratic and community control. Finally, in lieu of branding as the main discursive interface between the profession and the public (a model which architects do not advocate in the star system to which most architectural institutions tacitly subscribe), a radical democratic approach would eliminate the star/guru myth, instead supporting the collective intelligence that generates (or raw power grabs of economic, racial, or sexual natures), institutions need to be understood as, and transformed into, machines of collective subjectivation; world-building social instruments in political and aesthetic terms.

In American architecture, the dominant associations—NCARB and AIA—serve the current economic structure in their own particular ways. NCARB protects the public’s interest by setting standards of competency for architects to ensure public safety. Its members are the state architectural licensing boards. The AIA “protects” the profession’s interest and organizes its professional goals. While NCARB and AIA jointly maintain NAAB, NCARB makes a point of distancing itself from the AIA in that, it says, consultation with the self-interest of the profession undermines public trust and incurs suspicion under antitrust laws. At the same time, the AIA, despite being the organization meant to advocate for architects, only promotes aesthetic and functional “exceptionalism” and fails to campaign for circumstances that would make architecture more powerful, relevant, or just as NCARB distances itself from “helping” architects because of antitrust laws, the AIA backs off from political advocacy for fear of antitrust recrimination. Having two consent decrees issued against them in 1972 and 1989 for price fixing, the AIA operates off its left foot when trying to prove the profession’s worth to the public.

As a profession, then, architecture, like other professions, suffers under antitrust law enforcement, a capital-imposed competition. (Antitrust laws are governed by the simple principle of guaranteeing no longer necessarily positive in today’s context of a hyper-competitive neoliberal economy. In their place, alternative organizational mechanisms that undo the coercive control over how we associate, work and culturally legitimate social divisions of labor are necessary. Instead of simply exercising rhetorics of expertise and rationality for the sake of market efficiency (of raw power grabs of economic, racial, or sexual natures), institutions need to be understood as, and transformed into, machines of collective subjectivation; world-building social instruments in political and aesthetic terms.

Radical democracy offers a rethinking of professional institutions by transcending a governmentally-imposed insistence on competition (of a piece with “austerity” economics) and the brutal division of labor and expertise that come with it. At the broadest level, this would imply deprofessionalization. No longer a negative term depicting deskill in the “learning professions,” deprofessionalization could undeniably architecture—still competency-certified and still passionately driven—of its ideologically hang-ups: aristocratic class identification; specialization that holds us apart from other actors in the AEC industry; the false ideal of a metaphysically superior expertise; ignorance of a complex balance of diverse social forces; unfilled notions of autonomy; fictitious ideas of being above business; and the expense of elite education. It would allow for fluid movement between disciplines as architects morph into landscapers, engineers, water-managers, programmers, ethnographers, industrial designers, artists, etc.

Alternatively, a more dynamic conception of professionalism could be introduced, such as those found in staged systems of either licensing or certification—like pilots’ “licenses”, which vary according to different experience and type (for particular aircraft over 12,500 pounds) and expertise. In aviation, one operates (in ascending order of expertise) as a student, sport, recreational, private, commercial, or airline transport pilot, with privileges broken down by category (for example, one cannot fly a 747 with a single-class type license), class (classifications within categories of aircraft such as single-engine or multi-engine), and type (for particular aircraft over 12,500 pounds or turbine-powered, multi-level certification/licensure in architecture would respond to the individual passions of from a litigation-oriented approach toward a regulatory one. 17. This would obviously imply a new social contract altogether, as other professions and the very distribution of capital in society would have to be radically changed in order to be able to sustain these new freedoms. What we are suggesting is that such a change could begin with an antitrust action across different disciplines to alter the existing institutional arrangements propelling up the social division of labor.

13. As Google, for example, recently announced: “Alphabet to build futuristic city in Toronto,” Financial Times, 17 October 2017. (https://www.ft.com/content/5bc04ca6-6bbe-11e6-a3b6-7035f3855d39)

In the current context, most architects primarily experience architecture as a job. The term “job” defines a common sense view in which social, bureaucratic, scientific, and other kinds of labor are understood as primarily a market process rather than a social or political one. A “job” in this sense defines the de-politicized instrumentalization of tasks, devoid of any philosophical meaning, and thus perfect for the aimless process of accumulation of capital for its own sake. Radical democracy would propose not the exchange of jobs for aimless leisure, but to move from jobs to work. “Work,” in contrast to “jobs,” stretches our subjectivity beyond mere self-indulgence or ineffective agency while integrating this subjectivity into a social network both collaborative and mutually rewarding.

The fixation on jobs is certainly the work of capitalism and industrialization, Taylorization, scientific management, and Fordism were central to this process.19 With neoliberalism, the division of labor and its required administration have moved from mere management to a more ideologically-driven managerialism. Managerialism is, on the one hand, “a belief that organizations have more similarities than differences and that performance of all organizations can be optimized by the application of generic management skills and theory”20; but it is also an ideology that, moving beyond workplace, infiltrates organizations, public institutions, civil society, and the very production of the self.21 Architecture sits in a particular relationship to managerialism because most architectural firms are devoid of any management skills at all—hence our general inability to optimize productivity without throwing more employee hours at a task. At the same time, the managerialist mentality has permeated both our attitude about what counts as “successful work” (positive economic outcomes) and our acceptance that our managers must know best. Of, more problematic still, we all see ourselves as managers. Rarely identifying as a worker, the architectural employee relates to those managing them because they themselves will soon be in that managerial role (and, in any case, there is only harm in arguing against them); the mid-level managers assume they will move up that ladder and wear their management status happily; and owners, precluded from the sense of real ownership of ideas, hope at best to be good managers.22 One role of managerialism is to disempower the insights of owners. Managerialism is what allows us architects to by-pass any discourse of labor whatsoever. Under capital- ism, architectural labor is ultimately hired and organized for the purpose of extracting a profit; work is precarious, ambiguous, and alienating; and tasks are intensified and polarized—yet we have failed to analyse labor as such, in all its qualitative, aesthetic, dimensions, in our economic explanations or value propositions.

Architectural radical democracy would reorganize work to better accommodate task interdependence; it would offer “decentralization as a means of enabling flexible responses to variable and uncertain operating conditions,”23 without exacerbating precariousness; it would commit to solidarity of the victims of bad management ethics. It would encourage architectural workers to organize to improve the terms and conditions of their employment; it suggests that practitioners could directly understand our noble work and trying to secure our titled professionals for public good. One need only think of the Deutsche Werkbund as one out of many examples—however complex and uneven their roots and outcomes may have been, as with the Werkbund’s relation to German nationalism and corporate capitalism. The point is that we need to re-think and re-engage the relation between architectural delivery and democracy, an equation that has historically layered the market under neoliberalism. See: Frederick J. Schwartz, The Werkbund: Design Theory and Max Culture Before the First World War (New Haven: Yale, 1996).
become more fluid, horizontal, and complex. Central to achieving this is bringing back a modified and updated concept of class—not as a teleological discourse, but as a social identification that is primarily enacted through the de facto positions that different people and groups occupy in any given social arrangement. In capitalism, this arrangement corresponds with the relative ownership of capital. Thus, a concrete step in the direction of a radical architectural democracy would entail the promotion of employee-owned practices and the participation of all stakeholders in the determination of architectural and urban programs. These structural changes in architecture are necessary preconditions for the positive cultural shifts offered by the theory of radical democracy.

Adopting this position in architecture today means not only becoming more politically activist, but also expanding our notions of labor to go beyond the ideological discourses of managerial entrepreneurialism—attempting to see structures of feeling and production, once again. If post-structuralisms of every kind (including the theory of radical democracy) destroyed the stability of meaning of class as a concept, this does not mean that class effectively disappeared in the real world; on the contrary, it became ever more transcendental and pervasive. In turn, if the structural conditions of capitalism underpinning architecture can be grasped, this will pave the way for a more capacious, inclusive, and dynamic notion of labor and class itself. As labor becomes less alienated, it is the world itself that appears in view, and in play.

Articulating the nature of this aesthetic discourse of architectural labor goes beyond the scope of this short paper, which has attempted to merely outline the complex theoretical field between the worlds of architecture and radical democracy, a field that warrants further and systematic elaboration. The Architecture Lobby, an activist organization to which both authors belong, will continue elaborating on key aspects of this framework in subsequent papers on environmentalism, professionalism, managerialism, and technology and automation as they pertain to architecture.