

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 fallouts 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 manoeuvrings 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 infrastructure plans) through ineffective and superficial "reports," "listening rounds," and other recuperative strategies of corporate "inclusion."¹

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 theorized 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 centrality of "revolution" as a transcendental break with the past, the privileged role of the working class as the agent of historical change, and the ascendancy of economics over any other social determination, are critically reconceived. As a theory, radical democracy attempts to understand "the ontology of the social" while rejecting the truisms of essentialist models that enshrine 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 classical Marxist orthodoxy (that would see the world as a primarily economic structure totalized by capitalism 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.²

This cultural versus structural description of society attempts to reckon with identifications that are not just economically illogical, but often contradictory.³ 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 rethinks class, in as much as 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 theorize class around 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, ideology ought to be understood as an "organic and relational whole, embodied in institutions and apparatuses" rather than reflecting only structures of production.⁴



Architecture Lobby members perform outside the Pennsylvania Convention Center during the 2016 National AIA Convention.

Thus, in Laclau and Mouffe's theory, work, workers, and the working class are reconceived as follows: (1) In lieu of the idea that the economic process is a categorical, 'transparent', and objective phenomenon where capital and labour relate exclusively in economic terms, Laclau and Mouffe argue that socio-cultural relations are fundamental to the economic process. The fact that workers are able to socially organize themselves and affect the nature and terms of their working conditions de-mystifies the idea that "the economy could be understood as an autonomous and self-regulated universe."⁵ (2) In lieu of the idea of the working class as a homogenous unity that fully identifies with itself in a common economic context, the authors find the working class is a divided and divisive category, with unequal groups (sexes, races, legal status, etc.) and unequal

conditions (hours, salaries, benefits), and that these are "political, not merely economic divisions."⁶ And (3) the authors dismiss the primacy of revolution—critiquing modernist avant-gardes' privileged access to "a rational and necessary movement of history accessible to scientific knowledge"⁷—an

idea that assumes teleological historical development, and a separation between leadership and ordinary citizens. Instead, they promote a constantly dynamic process of reconfiguration of individual and collective identities, implying constant struggle and antagonism without any historically-preordained resolution.

1. See The Architecture Lobby, "A Response to AIA Values", *The Avery Review* 23, April 2017. Available at: <http://averyreview.com/issues/23/a-response-to-aia-values>

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 Retreat From Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986). For an influential history of the relations between post-structuralist and Marxist theories, see: Perry Anderson, *In 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 interpretive synthesis. See: Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International, 1995).

4. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 67.

5. *Ibid.*, 80.

6. *Ibid.*, 82.

7. *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.”⁸ 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 seeking out of “chains of equivalences” between the different struggles that constitute the democratic public sphere in order to forge a new (yet always contingent) democratic socialist hegemony. They call for a new left politics that seeks strategic alliances between those struggling against sexism, racism, nationalism, environmental degradation, and the plights of workers, in order to create a viable alternative to neoliberal politics. A common socialist practice would hinge “upon a ‘collective will’ that is laboriously constructed from a number of dissimilar points.”⁹ This view of social change is never fully resolved or crowned by a master-historical “revolution,” but implies ceaseless reconfiguration with no guarantee of a utopian resolution—only a fairer, more democratic process.

Radical Democracy and Neoliberalism

The principles given here by Laclau and Mouffe, as written over thirty years ago, predate eco-

nomical and political events that reflect the full blush of present-day neoliberalism. Advanced neoliberalism exacerbates the struggles previously identified in the critique of late capitalism—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 extremely 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 illusive self-empowering paradigms operate as coercive mechanisms (‘Be creative! Or else... lose your job, health care, etc.’) that fulfil the anti-democratic requirements of finance capital and neoliberal globalization.

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.¹⁰ Thus, for example, instead of feminist claims radically disrupting a heteropatriarchal form of social organization, in the corporate sector they tend to supplement and legitimize it. 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.

We will articulate these three aspects with reference to the architectural profession. Each

aspect can be understood schematically in terms of scales—(1) the geopolitical as it affects architecture; (2) the associations that configure architectural communities, organizations, and institutions; and (3) the discourses and policies aimed at rationalizing the division of labor at the scale of the individual and the office.

Radical Architectural Democracy

1. Geopolitics

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.¹¹ 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 where 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 capabilities rather than their social commitment or expertise.

Radical democracy offers different approaches to deliberating, analysing, and mo-

singular categories such as class. One result of this that we are now only too familiar with is the commodification of identity claims themselves. Instead of the proliferation of identities serving the worthy goals of radical democratic enfranchisement, in neoliberalism they have been channelled in more tokenistic terms as new marketable assets. For more on this line of argument, see: MaurizioLazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014).

11. Bob Jessop, Jamie Peck, and Adam Tickell, “Retooling the Machine: State Restructuring, Uneven Development, and Urban Politics,” in A.E.G. Jonas and D. Wilson, eds., *The Urban Growth Machine: Critical Perspectives Two Decades Later* (New York: SUNY, 1999).

bilizing 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 globalism 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.¹² 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 sidelining 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 indifference 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 collaboration with “subs” is the norm. We should discard the class-based condescension that is at the root of professionalism. And we should see that the squabbles we have with our contractors and consultants pale in comparison to the larger forces that sell the built environment down the river.

Radical democracy implies the embrace of conflict rather than its denial: architectural practitioners must *both* protest injustices in the streets *and* be at the decision-making table, actively calling out the spurious motives of developers. Equally, we should bring the people who inhabit our spaces into the process of de-

12. This critique—that capitalism tends towards monopolies and financialization, creating problems for itself—is central to the Marxist understanding of the capitalist mode of production, especially under conditions of “unfettered” free-market capitalism of the kind seen in the 19th century, and which neoliberalism has quite successfully attempted to reproduce the world over since the 1970s. The thesis of “secular stagnation” due to lack of productive investment was integrated by capitalists themselves in the 1930s, by thinkers as diverse as Keynes and Schumpeter. For **a another** ‘mainstream’ contemporary interpretation, see: Larry Summers, “The Age of Secular Stagnation,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-02-15/age-secular-stagnation>.

8. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically* (London; New York: Verso, 2013).

9. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 87.

10. As social identities become “unfixed,” Mouffe and Laclau note that “[i]dentity, then, has become purely relational” (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 86), not conditioned by

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 alarmingly feudal flavour,¹³ architecture must leverage cyber-physical systems such as smart grids, virtual power plants, smart homes, intelligent transportation, and smart 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 “innovation” under radically democratic, not shareholder, control.

Finally, in lieu of branding as the main discursive interface between the profession and the public (a model which architects do not admit to but that is implicit in the star system to which most architectural institutions tacitly subscribe), a radical democratic approach would eliminate the star/genius myth, instead supporting the collective intelligence that gathers in the architectural office/collective and celebrating those firms that take ethical posi-

tions—rejecting purely market-driven work and models of organization—in the face of socio-political-economic perversity.

Too often, the price of being at the table of power where these struggles unfold is the cooption of our ambitions. To achieve meaningful engagement rather than betrayal, architects need to leverage their power politically, not only professionally. Yet this political power must be found across a spectrum of social movements, not only within architecture “itself.” This means articulating the common socio-economic bases of various struggles while not erasing their own specificities—an approach for which architects should be uniquely qualified given their competencies working across scales and contexts, from place to infrastructure. In this regard, demonstrations of conscientious expertise are the minimum baseline for cultural legitimization with diverse publics; more substantially still, socialization, unionization or cooperativization—in alliance with multiple urban-rural constituencies and other built environment professionals—would add a level of structural force to our ambitions for geopolitical-architectural equity.

2. Associations and Institutions

Architecture defines itself politically in the context of its professional institutions: NCARB, which monitors licensing through its establishment of education, experience, and licensure; AIA, which shapes professional coherence and identity; and NAAB and ACSA, which, respectively, monitor professional education standards and support educational research and development. While these institutions appear to be disciplinarily “natural,” they need to be understood in the context of professionalism, itself a construct of liberal capitalism. The three simultaneous goals of professionalism are: to ensure a guiding, elite knowledge sector; to—ironically, at the same time—hark back to pre-capitalist ideals of craftsmanship, universal protection of the social fabric, and *noblesse oblige*; and to offer conventions of standardization, scientific and cognitive rationality, and a functional division of labor.¹⁴ If they ever were, these goals are

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 (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 justly rewarded. Just as NCARB distances itself from “helping” architects because of antitrust laws, the AIA backs off from political advocacy for fear of antitrust recrimination.¹⁵ Having two consent decrees issued against them in 1972 and 1990 for apparent price fixing, the AIA operates off its left foot when trying to prove the profession’s worth to the public.¹⁶ As a profession, then, architecture, like other professions, suffers under antitrust law-enforced, capitalist-imposed competition. (Antitrust laws are governed by the single principle of guaranteeing

competition.) But architecture is different from law or medicine, which have powerful lobbies pushing for state legislation in their favor. It thus bears the worse effects and none of the rewards of antitrust legislation.

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 deskilling in the “learned professions,” deprofessionalization could unburden architecture—still competency-certified and still passionately driven—of its ideological 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; unfulfilled 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, and more.¹⁷

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 expertise.¹⁸ 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 (a classification of aircraft type), class (classifications within categories of aircraft such as single-engine or multi-engine), and type (for particular aircraft over 12,500 pounds or turbojet-powered). A similar, multi-levelled certification/licensure in architecture would respond to the individual passions of

13. As Google, for example, recently announced: “Alphabet to build futuristic city in Toronto,” *Financial Times*, 17 October 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/5044ec1a-b35e-11e7-a398-73d59db9e399>

14. Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: Monopolies of Competence and Sheltered Markets* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2013), xiii.

15. While professions for many years operated outside antitrust laws for their special societal integrity as established by their codes of ethics, since Reagan and neoliberalism, this is no longer the case.

16. Consent decrees are the normal way of resolving antitrust suits brought by the DOJ and FTC. They have the advantage of avoiding the expense of a trial and any admission of guilt. They set rules of conduct meant to stop the perceived illegal behavior and prevent possible recurrence. In other words, they move away

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 coordinated action across different disciplines to alter the existing institutional arrangements propping up the social division of labor.

18. In the US, pilots are actually certified, not licensed.

firms and their varying modes of expertise at the same time that it would dismantle the one-size-fits-all standardization behind current institutional arrangements.

One could imagine a professional organization that, instead of begging the public to appreciate our noble work and trying to secure commissions, provides a safety net for a discipline in seemingly perpetual precarity. Absent a society-wide Universal Basic Income, this safety net could be an organization similar to that instituted by the German government where all architects pay into a fund supporting retirement, or a guild that collects dues supporting both employers and employees during difficult times. Or one could consider a union that would represent employees to make sure that they are not suffering from illegal labor practices while also easing the burden on firm owners by negotiating systematic policies on overtime, payroll, benefits, leave policy, and vacation time. In either case, the multiple voices of those working in architecture—licensed or unlicensed, employee or employer, large or small-firm owner, academic or “professional”—would have a better chance of being heard and being able to argue for their contribution to the discipline.

Such potential dynamism in the institutional categories of architecture—based upon a social rather than market-based accounting of its embodied articulation—would be well complemented by further institutions acting to interface, coordinate, expand and animate the profession. For example, one contemplates an organization whose main aim is to coordinate architectural research and implement it through government action, making the building industry more effective and resilient, and the built environment more sensitive to real needs.¹⁹ Instead of leaving each firm alone to finance research (technological, material,

environmental, informational, etc.), this organization could gather and coordinate resources in the realization that we should not compete against each other but rather against forces (namely, capitalism, hetero-patriarchy, white supremacy, and other conservative hegemonic formations) that marginalize our best quality work altogether.

3. The Individual and the Office

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.²⁰

The fixation on jobs is certainly the work of capitalism and industrialization; Taylorization, scientific management, and Fordism were central to this process.²¹ 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 thus the performance of all organizations can be optimized by the application of generic management skills and theory”²²; but it is also an ideology that, moving beyond the

workplace, infiltrates organizations, public institutions, civil society, and the very production of the self.²³ 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. Or, 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.²⁴ 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 capitalism, 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 equations or value propositions.

Architectural radical democracy would reorganize work to better accommodate task interdependency; it would offer “decentralization as a means of enabling flexible responses to volatile and unpredictable operating conditions,”²⁵ without exacerbating precarity; 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

acknowledge their exploitation of others’ labor to secure their jobs; and it would encourage academics to “legitimately use their academic positions as a pulpit from which to challenge students to recognize the oppressive nature of the system they are being prepared for.”²⁶ Clearing the managerial workplace from coercive mechanisms of control opens the way for the development of an aesthetic understanding of architectural labor—one in which our work is not merely an economic function in a developer’s spreadsheet, but a positive articulation of collaborative expertise, materials, places, emotions, and nourishing social relations.

To get there, these necessary ideological (*cultural*) realignments of architectural work need to be *structurally* re-organized away from the reliance on a mobile, unhinged labor market force, to one in which employee-ownership, coordinated labor markets, and radically democratic modes of design and planning become the norm. Changing the habitual model of operation of the architectural office—one which has created a false continuity between the master guild craftsmen of yore and today’s starchitecture offices, but without any of its social protections—means actually enfranchising architectural workers as owners, with a corresponding socialization of architectural offices’ economic surplus and determination of strategic objectives.

Conclusion

While many of the above suggestions for rethinking architecture in line with practices of radical democracy do indeed rest on the acceptance of the *cultural* nature of social identity and organization, it is crucial to note that their actual implementation cannot rest on the cultural level alone; a more *structural* understanding of power relations is necessary. If we want to actually transform the profession, our concrete institutions and not only our theories have to

19. Institutes like this, at the intersection between professional expertise and government, have historically heralded the most intense periods of architectural experimentation for the 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 become totally dominated by the market under neoliberalism. See: Frederic J. Schwartz, *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture Before the First World War* (New Haven: Yale, 1996).

20. This reconception of “jobs” to “work” owes much to the work of Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, Henri Lefebvre, and Hardt & Negri, among others. Fundamentally, it implies a recognition that “jobs” are never really “just jobs”, but are socially produced—that is, in a capitalist system they necessarily produce physical and mental alienation, as they artificially cut people off from each other. Furthermore, in feminist terms, they bracket out the centrality of social reproduction and the work of women and affective economies of care.

21. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*.

22. Thomas Klikauer, “What Is Managerialism,” *Critical Sociology* 41.7-8 (2015), 1104.

23. See: Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone, 2015); Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: on Neoliberal Society*, (Brooklyn: Verso, 2013).

24. It is helpful here to think about publicly traded companies. The owners of the entity are the stockholders who have no care for the product other than capital gain. The CEO’s—who we hear most about, get the huge compensations, and move (as uber-organizational experts) from company to company—

are all managers. Architectural firms for the most part are not publicly held and so do not fall directly under this model; but they do absorb its ideology. See: Gerald Davis, *Managed by the Markets: How Finance Reshaped America* (Oxford; New York: Oxford, 2011).

25. Paul S. Adler, Linda C. Forbes and Hugh Willmott, “Critical Management Studies,” 3.

26. *Ibid.*, 38.

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.²⁷ 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.



The Architecture Lobby, "(Re)Working Architecture," performance and workshop at Co-Prosperity Sphere, Chicago, 2015. Video still shot during the 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial. Full video available here: <https://youtu.be/4RJ3ZmL-tU4>