

Architecture and the Vicissitudes of Capitalism

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In an age of uncertainty we ask, “What is important?” The spaces and forms that make up our built environment provide us not only with the basic requirement of shelter but also with an endless array of experiences. As we consider what is meaningful in our lives, certainly our experience of architecture—our city streets, the places we call home, our edifices of culture—ranks high on the list of things we value. However, as with most things, our relationship to architecture is complicated, especially in our milieu of capitalist production and consumption. This essay will explore some of those complications, as interpreted through a Marxist lens, and argue that capitalism has exploited architecture, leaving us with only a shell of what could be a rich and fulfilling experience of the built environment. Within this unhappy picture emerge a few bright spots and possible directions through which architecture could be redeemed.

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To begin, there are at least three ways of thinking about what architecture is. The first understands architecture as the buildings that make up our environment. There are arguments about what can be classified as “architecture”—which structures are Architecture versus which are mere buildings—but this definition fundamentally describes an identifiable built *product*. A second definition, probably more accurate, recognizes architecture as a *process*. This takes into account the work of architects to produce drawings, which are made into buildings by the construction industry. In this case, “architecture” is the work done by architects in designing and overseeing construction. Again, there may be argument about when that process begins and ends, but it can be distinguished from the buildings that may result from the process. A third way of thinking about architecture would be in terms of *production*. This definition could include a number of activities—such as education, publishing, and exhibiting—that accompany the making of buildings and are often

carried out by people that are not architects. It also could include a number of products—books, drawings, renderings, models, websites—that are not buildings. These different ways of understanding architecture begin to hint at how the role of architects and the things that are produced may be open to exploitation.

Turning briefly now to Marx, we will consider his descriptions of exploitation before examining how it can be understood in connection with architecture. There are two forms of exploitation that I will look at here. The first is the exploitation of labor and the second is the exploitation of value. Regarding the exploitation of labor, in his *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx writes:

With the increasing value of the world of things, proceeds in direct proportion the devaluation of the world of men. Labour produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity—and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally. This fact expresses merely that the object which labour produces—labour’s product—confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labour. Labour’s realization is its objectification. In the conditions dealt with by political economy this realization of labour appears as loss of reality for the workers; objectification as loss of the object and object-bondage; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.¹

This passage outlines what Marx goes on to describe as the exploitation or “alienation” of the worker through the transformation of his labor power into an object. The worker is removed or “estranged” from what was most his—his own productive capacity. His lifeblood has gone into an object that is no longer his.² Marx is explicit and detailed in his discussion of how people with the capital necessary to employ labor are able to extract value through the production process. By turning labor power into sellable commodities—and paying less for labor than the value of the commodities produced—capitalists are able generate a profit. In this form of exploitation, we give up our labor power to produce a commodity that we do not own, but which sits before us and we are compelled to obtain.

According to Marx, exploitation also takes another form in which truth is divorced from reality. This comes in the divergence of exchange-value from use-value. Marx introduces these terms in the first section of *Capital* in his discussion of commodities. Use-value indicates the objective amount of labor-power put into an item, whereas exchange-value is a subjective amount established through social interaction. The divergence of these two forms of value has a couple of consequences. The first is that commodities may be exchanged at a different rate from what their use-value would indicate—which also serves to obscure the value of labor. A second consequence, which greatly concerned Marx, was that exchange-value, in the form of commodities, would entice production of useful articles solely for the purpose of exchange. “This division of a product into a useful thing and a value becomes practically important, only when exchange has acquired such an extension that useful articles are produced for the purpose of being exchanged, and their character as values has therefore to be taken into account, beforehand, during production.”³ This has further consequences: first that production is

modified to result in greater exchange value, and second that it requires labor to both satisfy a social want (i.e. have use-value) and be mutually exchangeable (i.e. have exchange-value). Marx also remarks that these two facets of value have the consequence of making value a “social hieroglyphic” that becomes impossible to decipher. It compels us to ask why are things being produced—because they are useful, or because they can be sold?

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With value impossible to decipher and labor-power estranged from the worker, the door is opened for exploitation. Capitalism is the chief vehicle of exploitation today. While I will not go further into the mechanisms of capitalism in this chapter, suffice to say that it employs the two strategies outlined above (exploitation of labor and exploitation of value) to accumulate capital in the form of money. Although Marx does not specifically address architecture, it is now possible to consider a number of interconnected ways in which architecture is exploited.

COMMODIFICATION

As Marx suggests, when something becomes a commodity it is on the path to exploitation. This is certainly true for architecture in a variety of ways. In its built form, architecture is commodified when it is bought and sold, or discussed in square feet and number of bathrooms. This is also true at the scale of materials. When a tree is cut down and sold as lumber or clay is made into bricks, the earth is exploited and turned into commodities. As commodities, materials and buildings are exchangeable and become principally thought of in terms of quantified exchange-value rather than for the quality of their use-value. Real estate developers rarely deliberate on the feelings or experiences someone may have, instead they focus on maximizing the value of every inch. In the same way, the process of architecture can be commodified as the services of architects and designers are measured in hours and productivity. Designers become labor-commodities in the building process as their services are measured for the exchange-value they contribute to a project. This is no truer than in the employment of “starchitects” on contemporary projects to exploit the name brand of certain designers to increase the exchange-value of buildings they work on. One example is the faux-classical building by Robert Stern at 15 Central Park West in Manhattan, which at approximately \$2 billion in sales ranks as the highest-priced new apartment building in the history of New York.⁴ While location and distinction are major factors, his name also adds cachet. These instances that characterize the commodification of architecture lay the groundwork for other means of exploitation.

GENTRIFICATION AND URBAN “DEVELOPMENT”

When buildings are exchanged as commodities, investors and developers play the market in search of profit. This leads to a cycle of real estate investment and dis-investment. Neil Smith identifies this as the pattern of gentrification.⁵ Smith describes gentrification as a cycle that begins with periods of dis-investment during which buildings and neighborhoods are intentionally neglected by capital in order to drive down their value. Real estate prices fall, conditions further decline, until these areas can be re-conquered by pioneering artists and designers looking for cheap space. For property owners and developers, the interest by the design vanguard signals an opportunity to re-invest, improving the quality of the neighborhood and opening it to more mainstream residents. This process, Smith explains, is underpinned by the practices of financial institutions, as well as the policies and operations of city governments.⁶ Capitalism drives the process of urban “development” to manipulate land values in order to extract a profit from real estate investment. In this pattern of gentrification, artists and designers are exploited and buildings and neighborhoods are held hostage to the profit motive of capitalism.

ABSORPTION OF SURPLUS CAPITAL

Another pattern that emerges when buildings are treated as commodities—perhaps even more sordid and pervasive—has been identified by David Harvey. “Spatial fix” is the term he has used to describe how capitalism uses urban development as a locus for surplus capital, in order to avoid crises of overaccumulation. Since Haussmann’s activities to transform Paris, buildings, real estate, and infrastructure have been increasingly used to absorb surplus capital.⁷ While at first glance this might appear beneficial to architecture—ready capital allows for heightened architectural development—this activity becomes unsustainable as capital seeks its profit. What seemed to be good for architecture turns out to be a thin mask for capitalist exploitation. By absorbing the surplus capital, buildings and infrastructure provided a safe reservoir to offset the faster-paced cycles of commodity production, but as profit is eventually extracted, capital leaves behind cheap, shoddy buildings and sucker-homeowners holding the bag. Of course this is further beneficial to capitalism through the cycle of dis-investment and gentrification. Real estate deteriorates and the next wave of creative destruction begins.

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND QUALITIES OF HOME

We all get used to a low-quality built environment and accept it as the norm. Our acceptance of commodified buildings, cheap construction, and the exploitation of design occurs through a process known as social reproduction. Social reproduction is a complex and dynamic process, but there are a few examples of how norms

are established and reinforced that are worth discussing in regards to architecture. One of the ways in which social patterns are established is through the production of desire.⁸ In the realm of architecture and design, desire is produced through ubiquitous media such as home remodeling television shows and images circulated in print. What may begin as desire is reinforced by the limited options people are given when it comes to the built environment. People are induced to consume building products, but their choices are severely limited by standardization and mass production, which again is driven by capitalist profit seeking. Everyone from manufacturers to retailers to construction contractors stand to benefit from offering fewer options and charging a premium for customization. Although architecture has the potential to be uniquely adapted to the needs and conditions of its inhabitants, the demand for profit often forces consumers into a generic box.

These examples describe the productive and consumptive aspects that shape social reproduction, but there are other processes that reinforce social norms in deeper and subtler ways. Witold Rybczynski discusses how we have slowly come to our contemporary notion of “home” in which everyone is expected to live within a private, individualized sphere.⁹ The expansive possibilities of architecture are constrained by the assumption that every family home must have its kitchen, dining room, master bedroom and bathroom suite, and two-car garage. Even the most progressive design is reduced by the social expectations about what our spaces should offer.¹⁰ This has resulted in stunted advancement of sustainable design options and continued limitations on the environmental choices of people that have disabilities.¹¹ Perhaps the most insidious issue is our continued construction of suburban McMansions. This type of residence persists as the emblem of middle class life in America as a consequence of spatial privatization and capitalist alienation. We continue to love and build these houses because our socially reproduced ideal remains the myth of individual liberty, in the face capitalist domination.

ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

On the surface, issues of social reproduction are what education seeks to mitigate—more educated designers (and clients) should be able to make better design choices. However, this problem of social reproduction is often exacerbated by education in architecture. Some schools of architecture intentionally reproduce the status quo and make no effort to challenge social convention or the forces of capitalism. They embrace the role designers play in the production process and the highest goal these programs strive for is gaining employment for their graduates. Other schools are unintentional reproducers—teaching a canon of design that reinforces the norms without considering the consequences. However, most schools imagine themselves as progressive or even rebellious. Nevertheless, unable to modify social expectations or situate themselves to push back against capitalist hegemony, they fall back into an easy discourse about styles and formal aesthetics. These schools, while challenging the appearance of architecture, remain confined

within the bounds of what is socially acceptable and expected. Unfortunately this fallback position of architectural education has a double-edged consequence that opens the door to further exploitation of architecture.

FORMALISM

When designers focus their energy on making eye-catching forms and debating how things look, they become marginalized in the production process. For one reason, formal arguments about style and aesthetics tend to be seen as less important within the larger context of economics and production. These “aesthetic” debates can be written off as frivolous and secondary to practical concerns. At the same time, because design does not actually challenge or modify the practical concerns of how people inhabit places, it can be viewed as superfluous. The emphasis on aesthetic arguments and the failure to rethink the ways in which people live are indicative of a profession that has lost its sense of purpose. At best, design is merely employed to produce desire, but more often it becomes seen as irrelevant and a waste of money. Unfortunately this has further consequences that intensify exploitation in architecture. When design is perceived as unnecessary, this creates an atmosphere in which architects must constantly justify their services...and reduce their fees. This induces competition among architects and magnifies the degree to which they can be exploited.

SPECTACLE, “INNOVATION”, AND “VALUE ENGINEERING”

Competition between designers further emphasizes style over what little substance might be possible. Architects race to produce images—“money shots”—that will grab attention, buildings are branded, and apartments are staged for sale. The visual is valued above the tactile—the spectacle over experience.¹² Emphasis is placed on “innovation” and novelty, which quickens the pace of production and consumption. No time is allowed for research or to develop projects thoroughly. Instead the process is streamlined, buildings are standardized, and perhaps in the most sinister twist of all, projects are “value engineered.”¹³ This term, perfectly descriptive of the process capitalists use to extract the most profit from their projects, confronts architects at every step and aptly summarizes the ways in which architecture is exploited.

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I’ve painted a pretty wretched picture, but is it really all bad? Perhaps not. It is possible to tease out of this rough description of how architecture is exploited a few ways in which architecture may benefit from its engagement with capitalism. In periods of investment, architecture and the role of architects expands rapidly.

During these times, increased production may put greater demands on architects, but it has also meant more opportunities to build and a greater diversity of buildings constructed. Likewise, slow periods of building have often been attributed to the strongest growth in academic and conceptual development in architecture. This view holds that interaction with capital—during boom and bust—is good for architecture as it progresses as a discipline and profession.¹⁴

Another point of view suggests that the portrayal of architecture in the media indicates that there is a growing appreciation for design. As people are more exposed and become more aware of design, they are more likely to understand and desire to modify their environment. This would re-value design, making it worth the expense, and move it from the margins closer to the center—thereby reversing the pattern of social reproduction and competition described above. In this case, designers become instrumental and architecture plays a role in changing social norms.

A third way of thinking about the significance and sublime beauty of architecture and production is suggested by Walter Benjamin through his notion of phantasmagoria. In one of the most striking passages in his essay, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” Benjamin introduces the concept to describe the experience of the Arcades in Paris—a fantastic architectural space intended as a marketplace for commodities.¹⁵ Benjamin is keenly aware of the contradictions inherent in this vivid experience, but unlike some critics who dismiss it outright, Benjamin is drawn to explore this fascinating and dynamic realm of architecture and commodity. As critics like Marshall Berman point out, there is room for a similar approach today.¹⁶ While it is possible to indicate the ways in which architecture is open to exploitation by capital, it is also possible to experience the heady and often remarkable constructions made possible through capital.

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I would like to make a few more points before drawing to a conclusion. First, it should be clearly noted that architecture is not necessarily the innocent victim in the processes of exploitation I’ve described above. Architecture needs capital to be built and is often willing to do business with the capitalist devil in order to be realized. Architecture not only deals with capital out of necessity, but often architecture benefits—at least in the short term—from this relationship. As pointed out above, architecture expands and grows with capital, and in some cases architects themselves stand to profit through investment or real estate development. Another example of architecture’s complicity with capital is presented by Anthony Ward, who argues that architecture frequently provides a screen for the operations of capitalism.¹⁷ In his examples, he shows how discourses centered on form, function, or linguistics don’t allow for discussion of the needs and people that architecture should serve. He posits that this deception—architecture focused away from people—creates a mask for capital to continue extracting profit, rather than provide for the inhabitants of these projects through a participatory process.

Designers must ask themselves, “Am I motivated by profit and cultural status, or am I committed to engaging and serving people who can truly benefit from a better built environment?” Too often the idealism of youth is transformed into the calculated operations of the profession. Professionalism should ensure a high set of standards for environmental quality and ethical practice, but more frequently it serves as an exclusionary mechanism that channels projects towards the dominant firms. Often, these firms have gained their positions of dominance through their willingness to service the needs of capitalism. If we are willing to ask questions about how designers can challenge the demands and conventions of a market-based economy, then it is worth discussing what can be done about our situation.

Perhaps the most immediate solution is for the profession to pursue a more local and participatory approach that better integrates the voices of users and communities. Designers can initiate projects to address issues they see in front of them,¹⁸ and work with their clients to reduce focus on bottom line profitability. As for broader changes, some critics contend that architecture, as a profession, should be socialized—much like medicine in some parts of the world. The services of architects could be made publicly available and subsidized by the government. To some degree this is the recent situation in the Netherlands and was once a possibility in the U.S. in the 1930s. This arrangement would allow designers to address the needs of a far greater and more diverse population and could relieve architecture of the pressure of commodification.

Another possibility lies in Benjamin’s exhortation from the “Author as Producer.” Roughly paraphrased, Benjamin argues: “The more completely the architect can orient his work toward mediating activity to adapt the apparatus of production to the purposes of the proletarian revolution, the more correct the political tendency of his work will be, and necessarily also the higher its technical quality.”¹⁹ This proposition suggests that architects continue to practice, but at the same time begin to resist or subvert the demands of capital, and actively work to dismantle or adapt the system of production.²⁰ In so doing, Benjamin imagines that the architect could continue to produce a dynamic and phantasmagoric environment while shifting their effort toward the aims of revolutionary practices.

A final possibility for disengaging architecture from capitalism is through the intervention of mediating institutions. If organizations such as schools, museums, and not-for-profit design resources were able to buffer architects and the process of making buildings from the demands of capitalism, it could create a territory in which designers could develop projects and offer services that they would otherwise be unable to do. As suggested above, schools and other institutions are positioned to challenge conventions that are socially reproduced. Education, especially at the college level, is an opportunity to test alternatives and engage communities within the context of a stable and supportive system that is not expected to produce a profit. Projects by the Rural Studio at Auburn University or the Detroit Collaborative Design Center at the University of Detroit-Mercy come to mind as successful examples of how schools can provide a way for students to think differently about the possibilities of design.²¹ Other organizations have also had success as platforms for designers to operate without the normal constraints of

capitalist production. Van Alen Institute has historically held design competitions intended to generate ideas, stimulate conversation, and propel the work of imaginative young designers.²² Design Corps and Architecture for Humanity²³ were founded in response to specific social and humanitarian needs, and have expanded to provide opportunities for designers to engage communities and develop architectural responses to crises all over the world. While none of these represents a silver bullet solution to the monstrous challenge of capitalism, they do suggest ways of re-working our current social and spatial conditions.

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The relation between architecture and capitalism remains tricky. As with everything capitalism encounters, there is the devastating likelihood that architecture will remain subject to exploitation. Rarely do architects stand against the demands of capitalism—they would be out of work. As long as buildings continue to go up, architecture's engagement with capitalism allows for the extraction of surplus value from design services as well as the built environment. However, the fundamental creativity inherent in architecture suggests that it may be possible to disengage capital and find better ways of working. The high ideals of designers, coupled with an ethic of engagement and service could challenge the conventions of capitalist production. In any case, the intent is not to diminish the phantasmagoria of contemporary life, but to transform it into an environment that encourages the full development of all. If so, architecture would stand to flourish, as would the lives of its inhabitants.

NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', in *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. Tucker (Norton, 1978), 71–72.
- 2 It is interesting to note that architects are still to some degree associated by name with architecture, whereas factory workers have no association with the products they produce.
- 3 Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One* (Penguin, 1992 [1867]), 322–323.
- 4 There are many other examples of residential developers employing well-known architects, including Charles Gwathmey, Richard Meier, Herzog and de Meuron, and Frank Gehry, who have all completed recent projects in New York City.
- 5 Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
- 6 Of course these policies are to a large degree manipulated by the bond rating agencies that play a crucial role in the mechanism of capitalist exploitation. See *The Neoliberal City* (2006) by Jason Hackworth.
- 7 David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (Routledge, 2005).
- 8 Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire* (Thames and Hudson, 1986).

- 9 Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (Viking, 1986).
- 10 Take *Dwell Magazine* for example.
- 11 Rob Imrie. 2004. "Disability, Embodiment and the Meaning of the Home." *Housing Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 5, 745–763.
- 12 Juhani Pallasmaa, "Toward an Architecture of Humility: On the Value of Experience," in *Judging Architectural Value*, ed. W. Saunders (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 96–103.
- 13 Cliff Moser, "Using Active Value Engineering for Quality Management" The American Institute of Architects, (2009).
- 14 However, I would argue that this view treats architecture as an end in itself, which seems problematic.
- 15 Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. P. Demetz (Schocken, 1986).
- 16 Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (Penguin, 1988).
- 17 Anthony Ward, "The Suppression of the Social in Design," in *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*, ed. Dutton and Mann (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
- 18 I am thinking of projects by Teddy Cruz, or City Farm in Chicago, as well as the many projects completed by Community Development Corporations.
- 19 Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. P. Demetz (Schocken, 1986).
- 20 To some degree it can be argued that Rem Koolhaas has adopted such a strategy, articulated by Dieter Lesage as "over-identification." See *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-Identification*, edited by BAVO (Episode Publishers, 2007).
- 21 Jason Pearson, ed. *University-Community Design Partnerships: Innovations in Practice* (National Endowment for the Arts, 2002).
- 22 William Mangold, "Considering the Role of Van Alen Institute in Architectural Production" (unpublished manuscript).
- 23 These and many other organizations are profiled in *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*, edited by Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till (Routledge, 2011).