

THE MISSED ENCOUNTER
OF RADICAL PHILOSOPHY
WITH ARCHITECTURE

EDITED BY NADIR LAHIJI

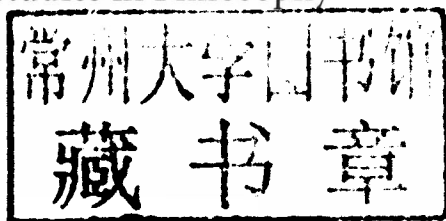
FEATURES AN INTERVIEW WITH MLADEN DOLAR

B L O O M S B U R Y

The Missed Encounter of Radical Philosophy with Architecture

Edited by
Nadir Lahiji

Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy



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for Nayere. . .

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(Continuum Press, 2009); 'Drawing, Thinking, Doing: From Diagram Work to the Superfold', in *ACCESS*, 30 (2011); 'What Can We Learn from the Bubble Man and His Atmospheric Ecologies', in *IDEA: Interior Ecologies* (2011), 'Following H  l  ne Cixous's Steps Towards a Writing Architecture', in Naomi Stead and Lee Stickells guest editors, *ATR (Architecture Theory Review)*, 15,3 (2010); edited volume *Deleuze and Architecture*, EUP, 2013, *forthcoming*.

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This book is dedicated to my sister, Nayere Zaeri.

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Introduction: Philosophy and Architecture: Encounters and Missed Encounters, Idols and Idolatries

Can the art of architecture be a ‘cipher for social antagonisms’?¹ This is the question for which the contemporary radical philosophy has failed to provide an answer. This failure is the crux of the proposed title for the present book, which claims that contemporary radical philosophy has missed its encounter with architecture.

Why this missed encounter?² From the outset, one, however, is justified to ask: what exactly does the word ‘radical’ in the term *radical philosophy* signify? At this point, it will be useful to bear in mind that any radical theory must first firmly locate architecture in the nexus of *art* and radical *politics*, and between politics and aesthetics, to which a number of contemporary radical thinkers have contributed novel theories. These theories are mainly focused on the lines of debate that concern not only a ‘political problematization of the concept of aesthetics’ but also that ‘*direct politicization of aesthetics*’ which was originally the project of the historical avant-gardes in the interwar years of the twentieth century.³ In our time, radical thinkers have offered complex analyses for a redefinition or ‘*de-definition of the aesthetics*’ linked to redefinitions of ‘politics’ (Alliez and Osborne, 2013). Alain Badiou’s concept of ‘Inaesthetics’ and Jacques Rancière’s of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ [*le partage du sensible*], to name two prominent cases, are among the most challenging ideas that are being widely discussed today by numerous commentators.⁴ If, after Kant, the case can be made that the formation of aesthetics is simply ‘the displacement of political desire into philosophical discourse about the structure of feelings through form’ (Alliez and Osborne, 2013, p. 8), then the thesis underpinning a contemporary account of aesthetics must be the conviction that any political thinking must a priori be grounded in philosophical thought, notwithstanding the reservation registered by the same philosophers with regard to the notion of ‘political philosophy’ as a specific discipline.⁵

These critical discourses should have a direct bearing on recovering the lost radical political thought and criticism to be found in architectural discourse of the late 1960s and early 1970s – mainly in the Italian context – which was replaced by postmodern or poststructuralist philosophy imported into the architectural discipline beginning in the 1980s. The effects of this importation (to be discussed in more detail below), in the absence of a politico-philosophical discourse on aesthetics, have brought us to the

point in the state of contemporary architecture that can be characterized as a transition from 'aesthetics sans politicization' to its end point, that is, the aestheticization of theory and practice verging on '*anaestheticization*', to use the term described by Susan Buck-Morss in her 'revisiting' of Walter Benjamin's 1936 *Artwork* essay.⁶ This aesthetic 'indistinction' blocks the distinction of *aisthesis*, in the sense discussed by Benjamin and Rancière,⁷ from the reigning contemporary image industry, which comes to serve the 'spectacle of capital-become-image'.⁸

In the *longue durée* of modern philosophical thoughts on art in the Western tradition, the last significant piece of writing on architecture is still the one written by the 'last' philosopher, Hegel, posthumously published, almost 200 years ago, as the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Hegel's lectures roughly coincide with the rise of modern architecture around the turn of nineteenth century and the writings of revolutionary architect and theoretician Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, the teacher at the École Polytechnique in Paris.⁹ By this time, architecture had begun to enter the cultural discourse of incipient capitalism but in the absence of any critical discourse about its role and function, it came to be connected, on the one hand, to radical revolutionary thought, and, on the other, to commodity culture, radical politics and aesthetics. Before Hegel, we find only architectural figures or the 'metaphor of architecture', which go back to Plato and get repeated in Descartes, Kant and Hegel himself. (The case of Nietzsche and his own use of the 'architectural metaphor' is a different case that I will discuss in a moment.) It must be pointed out here that, between the time of Hegel and our present age, no modern philosophical writings on architecture can perhaps compete with Hegel's essay in scope and depth, exhaustive if not exhausting, notwithstanding the various criticisms made against it. It is not an exaggeration to claim that the success and failure of every philosophical thought on architecture by any philosopher has to come to terms with Hegel's contribution, whether in its affirmation or refutation, not to mention in the hostility directed towards his philosophical system from Nietzsche to Gilles Deleuze. Needless to say, the time of Hegel's lectures and of the 'post-Kantian' period more generally, which is replete with philosophical writings on the arts, also belongs to the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, in which philosophical writings were characteristically connected to politics (Alliez and Osborne, 2013).

The 'metaphor of music', so to speak, never entered philosophy before Nietzsche with such intensity as can be found in his writing. It must be kept in mind that the reason for the ubiquitous presence of architectural figures and metaphors in the texts of philosophers from Plato onwards has been tied up with a project of 'grounding and stabilizing otherwise unstable philosophical systems' (Karatani, 1995, p. 4). This 'grounding' is never the aim of the metaphor of music. Nietzsche, and his decisive influence on architecture in the early years of the twentieth century, in this regard, is a unique case. The history of the immediate past, mainly over the last three decades, as regards the influence of philosophy on architecture has been limited to the hegemony of poststructuralist philosophy and Anglophone neopragmatism, which is still exerting an unwarranted influence on architectural discourse in the academy, albeit with diminishing returns and declining influence. Poststructuralism came with those anti-Platonist and anti-Hegelian strands which entered architectural discourse with the aim to weaken or 'deconstruct' the Kantian 'architectonics' of reason and to dampen the

'will to architecture'.¹⁰ This weakening of 'architectonic reason' is mainly due to the so-called French Nietzscheans. The French poststructuralists returned to Nietzsche and to his claim that 'Plato' is the name of 'sickness' from which one has to be cured. In fact, twentieth-century philosophical projects, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, were united against Plato and the 'tyranny' of *reason*.¹¹ Consider what Nietzsche wrote in his *The Twilight of the Idols*:

If one needs to make a tyrant of *reason*, as Socrates did, then there must exist no little danger of something else playing the tyrant. Rationality was at that time divined as a *saviour*; neither Socrates nor his 'invalids' were free to be rational or not, as they wished – it was *de rigueur*, it was their *last* expedient. The fanaticism with which the whole of Greek thought throws itself at rationality betrays a state of emergency: one was in peril, one had only one choice: either to perish or – be *absurdly rational*. . . . The moralism of the Greek philosophers from Plato downwards is pathologically conditioned: likewise their estimation of dialectics. Reason = virtue = happiness means merely: one must imitate Socrates and counter the dark desires by producing a permanent *daylight* – the daylight of reason. One must be prudent, clear, bright at any cost: every yielding to the instincts, to the unconscious, leads *downwards*. (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 33)

However, the poststructuralist return to Nietzsche overlooked Nietzsche's 'romanticist disposition' (Karatani, 1995). 'In opposition to reason', Karatani writes, 'romanticists regard as essential the manifold and contingency – immanent in concepts like, body, affect, feeling, and the like' (1995, p. 9). The 'French Nietzscheans', mainly Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, accomplished respectively deconstructive, genealogical and vitalist readings of philosophy (Schrift, 1995). In particular, it was Nietzschean *vitalism*, via Bergson, that entered Gilles Deleuze's oeuvre, whose philosophy has since the 1990s been continually discussed, albeit in a problematically reductive fashion, in academic architectural theory. But the current radical philosophy is not obsessed with Nietzsche or his anti-Platonism. On the contrary, the hallmark of radical philosophy today, at least in the work of some of its prominent representatives, including Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, is a re-turn to Plato, contra Nietzsche, letting itself be contaminated with his 'sickness' and no longer seeking a cure! Moreover, there is no pretension anymore in our radical philosophers to be the 'architects of new civilization' *à la* Nietzsche. It is rather a kind of return to the Kantian or Hegelian 'architectonic system' that is becoming the foundation of *radical* philosophy, which is not anymore bent on a 'deconstructive' act of weakening the 'will to architecture'.

Here, we can surmise the main factor that would constitute the element of 'radicality' in today's radical philosophy: It is, characteristically, a 'new materialism' which is combined with a 'return' to Plato, and in various ways, I would contend, to an 'architectonic system' in Kantian or Hegelian fashion. For Badiou, Nietzsche's philosophy is the exemplar case of an *antiphilosophy*.¹² This would no doubt have come *ex post facto* as a surprise to those architects and avant-garde artists in the early decades of the twentieth century who largely embraced *one philosophy*, that is, Nietzschean

philosophy. Whereas a host of philosophers have variously influenced architects and architectural critics from the late 1960s to present, it is perhaps not an overstatement to say that it was only Nietzsche who imparted a singular influence on architects and avant-garde artists in the early twentieth century, to entirely different effects. I want to briefly examine this influence in high modernism and its impact on the architecture field. This will help to place the contemporary relation between philosophy and architecture in a larger historical perspective.

For Nietzsche, who was more interested in *Kunstwollen* than the visual arts, architecture was the *first* art because it directly manifests the 'will to power'.¹³ In *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche famously wrote:

The *architect* represents neither a Dionysian nor an Apollonian condition: here it is the mighty act of will, the will which moves mountains, the intoxication of the strong will, which demands artistic expression. The most powerful men have always inspired the architects; the architect has always been influenced by power. Pride, victory over weight and gravity, the will to power, seek to render themselves visible in a building; architecture is a kind of rhetoric of power, now persuasive, even cajoling in form, now bluntly imperious. The highest feeling of power and security finds expression in that which possesses *grand style*. Power which no longer requires proving; which disdains to please; which is slow to answer; which is conscious of no witness around it; which lives oblivious of the existence of any opposition; which reposes in *itself*, fantastic, a law among laws: *that* is what speaks of itself in the form of grand style. (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 74)

Thus, architecture was for Nietzsche 'the aesthetic objectivization of the will to power'; it is architecture that constitutes 'the ecstasy of the great will': 'the edifice that manifests "pride, the defeat of gravity, the will to power"' (Bothe, 1999, p. x). As Bolf Bothe points out, when it comes to Nietzsche, the topic of art and architecture cannot be discussed in isolation from Weimar culture, 'that "enchanted" town in the shadow of Buchenwald, which ever since Goethe's time has oscillated between extremes of cosmopolitan openness and malignant philistinism. It is a place where "free spirits" have always needed themselves against pedagogues and "yes-men"' (Bothe, 1999, p. ix). Almost all the architects in the early twentieth century, from Henry Van de Velde to Peter Behrens, Mies van der Rohe and his friend and collaborator Ludwig Hilberseimer, to Bruno Taut, Eric Mendelsohn (as we are now informed by Fritz Neumeier), and above all, to Le Corbusier – who read *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the 'Master Builder', twice; first in his early career as painter-architect and later in his old age – adhered to the prophetic words of Nietzsche, which, paradoxically if not contradictorily, were shared by both architects who followed *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity, and the so-called Expressionists (Bergius, 1999).¹⁴ No less would the artist at the turn-of-the-century in Vienna and avant-garde artists in Futurist and Dada movements from Raoul Hausmann, Hugo Ball, Hanna Hoch, Johannes Baader, Hermann Finsterline, Kurt Schwitters and Georg Grosz and many others (Bergius, 1999). This period was the time of Weimar Republic and social democracy and radical political movements, the time of rising German industry, affecting all architects. The

Architectural programme at this time in the history of capitalist development was translated into a *social* programme. This was the time that capitalism had already fully entered commodity culture and the so-called society of consumption with its concomitant alienation and reification that saw its Marxist critics in Georg Lukács and others. It was also at this time that Benjamin and Ernst Bloch directly addressed architecture. Furthermore, it was at this time that the discourse of aesthetics entered the discourse of politics.¹⁵

In the span of time that can be marked from the moment after Hegel's writing to the twentieth century, up to 1960s, we can cite only rare occasions on which modern philosophers encountered architecture; always with brief contributions. In the short list, we might include Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer, Bloch and Heidegger. With few exceptions, from the 1960s to our present time, the relationship between radical philosophy and architecture has mainly been a case of a missed encounter. Jürgen Habermas, writing in the tradition of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, has devoted one essay directly to architecture and another one in which he indirectly addresses architecture.¹⁶ Similarly, in the philosophical environment of poststructuralism, we encounter only sporadic and brief thoughts from the likes of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard on architecture. Henri Lefebvre and the theorists associated with the Situationist International and Paul Virilio, on the other hand, represent some exceptions who paid a more serious attention to architecture and the analysis of the city.¹⁷

Architects of the so-called heroic period of modernism shared Nietzsche's desire for a liberation from the dead weight of history in a total act of purification and 'elimination': 'Nietzsche remodeled historicist architecture into the architecture of present, and he did so as an artist. "He who eliminates is an artist": an artist who can "see no value in anything unless it knows how to become form"' (Buddensieg, 1999, p. 266). The objective was to remove the content from the old architecture, as Nietzsche said, 'What nonartists call "form," the artist regards as content' (in Buddensieg, 1999, p. 266).

Nietzsche constantly engaged in an analogy between music and architecture, especially in relation to the 'grand style' about which he spoke in *The Twilight of the Idols* (as was quoted above). In a letter to Carl Fuchs, dated mid-April 1886, he wrote: 'Forgive me if I add one thing more. It is the *Grand Style* from which decadence is further removed: a description that applies to the Palazzo Pitti but not to the Ninth Symphony. The Grand Style, as the ultimate intensification of the art of melody' (in Buddensieg, 1999, p. 270). In a posthumous fragment he wrote, 'Will to power as art . . . No musician has ever yet built like the architect who built the Palazzo Pitti . . . Does music perhaps belong to a culture in which dominion of men of power, of every kind, has already come to an end?' (in Buddensieg, 1999, p. 270). It is in this musical analogy that pure form or 'emptiness' and freedom from content in architecture are obtained (Buddensieg, 1999). As Fritz Neumeyer points out, Nietzsche's thesis of the birth of art 'from the spirit of music' was instructive and attractive for the architect Eric Mendelsohn: 'An "architectural" feeling for music, which emphasized the importance of rhythm and, with Nietzsche, considered rhythm to be the origin of all poetry, led Mendelsohn to his own "musical" – and specifically rhythmic – feeling for architecture'

(Neumeyer, 1999, p. 294). In the widely cited aphorism 218 in *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche wrote:

The stone is more stone than before. In general we no longer understand architecture, at least by far in the way we understand music. We have outgrown the symbolism of lines and figures, as we have grown unaccustomed to the tonal effects of rhetoric, no longer having sucked in this kind of cultural mother's milk from the first moment of life. Originally everything about a Greek or Christian building meant something, and in reference to a higher order of things. This atmosphere of inexhaustible meaningfulness hung about the building like a magic veil. Beauty entered the system secondarily, impairing the basic feeling of uncanny sublimity, of sanctification by magic or the god's nearness. At the most, beauty tempered the *dread* – but this dread was the prerequisite everywhere. What does the beauty of a building mean to us now? The same as the beautiful face of a mindless woman: something masklike. (Nietzsche, 1984, pp. 130–31)

What is crucial to note in this passage is that Nietzsche, the artist-philosopher, regarded himself as 'a kind of architect of imagination' and wanted to see the edifice of his own thought as 'the mind that builds'. He wanted this 'art of thinking' to be synonymous with an 'art of building' in which the verbal noun *building* would be a fundamental human activity in creating form. This notion was not lost to the modern architects of the early twentieth century. As Neumeyer remarks, 'Known in German as the New Building, *das Neue Bauen*, the modern architecture of the 1920s was proclaimed by an avant-garde that summed up its weariness with traditional architecture by protesting the dishonest "masquerade" of fancy-dress facades' (Neumeyer, 1999, p. 286). Adolf Loos had sarcastically called this 'masquerade' a 'Potemkin city' (Loos, 1982). A new architecture thus must not only liberate itself from the past historicist dead weight of history but also must return to the act of building, rejecting 'architecture'. In this sense, the word 'architecture' was associated with 'ideology',¹⁸ 'In itself', as Neumeyer says, 'the choice of the verbal noun *Bauen* [building] should be interpreted as a principled rejection of *Architektur*' (Neumeyer, 1999, p. 286). *Building*, and not 'architecture', can be associated with the '*disenchantment of the world*' to use Max Weber's term.

In 1919, in the wake of Spartacus uprising, Weber wrote:

The fate of our time is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchantment of the world. It is precisely the supreme, the most sublime values that have been recreated from the public life, either into the transcendental realm of the mystical life or into the brotherliness of immediate human relations. It is no accident that our great art is intimate, not monumental, nor that it is amidst the smallest communities, between individual human beings, *pianissimo*, that there pulsates something corresponding to the prophetic *pneuma* that once swept like wildlife through the great communities and welded them together. If we try to force or 'invent' monumentality, the upshot will be a lamentable malformation, like the many monuments of the last twenty years. And