

Vol. I

Patrik Schumacher

THE AUTOPOIESIS OF ARCHITECTURE

A New Framework for Architecture

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Preface

What is the overarching aim of *The Autopoiesis of Architecture* and how does this work set out to achieve it? The book attempts a comprehensive discourse analysis of the discipline. This analysis combines with an effort towards theoretical systematization. The aim is thus an extensive theoretical *system* that offers itself to contemporary architecture as its self-description. The premise here is that architecture has constituted itself self-referentially, via its own autonomous, disciplinary discourse. The great theoretical treatises of architecture – starting with Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* of 1452 – can be regarded as self-descriptions in the sense aimed at here. **Self-descriptions** offer a reflective overview of the discipline's premises, values and methods in relation to its societal tasks. They have been a constitutive part of architecture since its inception as self-conscious discipline with the advent of the Italian Renaissance.

The concept of *autopoiesis*¹ refers to the overall discursive self-making of architecture. This is a continuous historical process and, to remain effective, it continues to require new theoretical efforts at each stage of its ongoing evolution. It is my conviction that the successful continuation of architecture's autopoiesis, now more than ever, requires an all-encompassing theoretical systematization that is able to clarify architecture's historical challenges, capacities and choices within contemporary society.

What does it take to achieve an all-encompassing theoretical systematization? The existing network of concepts and principles has to be transformed into an explicit *system* of sharpened terms and theses that captures the totality of the discipline's accumulated, conceptual resources. Therefore the conceptual apparatus that is being unfolded here is of considerable complexity. Nevertheless, I would like to think that this apparatus lives up to the criterion of parsimony if the unfolded conceptual complexity is measured against the expansive scope of phenomena that are to be encompassed, connected and systematically integrated. The task is not unlike a typical (contemporary) design problem: the construction of a legible conceptual architecture, based on

1 The concept was first introduced within biology by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to emphasize the self-producing nature of living systems. Maturana and Varela define as follows: 'an autopoietic machine continuously generates and specifies its own organization through its operation as a system of production of its own components', Humberto R Maturana & Francisco J Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition – The Realization of the Living*, D Reidel Publishing Company (Dordrecht), 1980.

the creative reworking of a lot of given material, to be synthesized into a new unified construct. A certain minimum degree of elegance,² achieved by forcing the material into a formal scheme, is a *conditio sine qua non* for any hope that the theory might be able to inscribe itself into the discursive trajectory of the discipline. Complementary to this is the attempt to condense the multiple conclusions the theory suggests into a series of theses designed to make an impression. This might increase the chance of propelling the respective insights into the discursive life-process of the discipline. The condensation of (potentially controversial) theses was an explicit and deliberate effort all along, because without conclusions that make a difference, the theoretical apparatus lies idle and the distinctness of the theory evaporates.³ Thus the task was to construct an encompassing, coherent theoretical account with a sufficiently sharp profile to spurn poignant theses.

The task of theoretical unification involved the comprehensive recasting of the familiar architectural concepts in rather abstract terms. The effect is initially defamiliarizing. The peculiarity and distinctiveness of the theory of architecture presented here will therefore require an initial endurance of intellectual vertigo, perhaps even nausea. On the first reading the resultant text might seem to oscillate between the trivial and the obscure. It is hard to avoid this effect in an attempt to introduce a new theoretical vocabulary and build up a systematic theoretical edifice that is intended to cover and reinterpret the familiar theoretical apparatus, recuperate accumulated insights, capture emergent trends *and* produce new, original insights in order to steer architecture into pertinent but yet uncharted pursuits. The strangeness of the theoretical language is a necessary part of any genuinely new perspective.

The spirit and mission of this theoretical effort are geared towards making an impact rather than offering disengaged contemplation, even if the primary mode of operation is descriptive and explanatory rather than proselytizing. I am keen to see the veracity of my reconstructive elaborations confirmed (or refuted) by historical research *and* I am keen to see the fertility of my extrapolative constructions tested by future practice. The analytic task here is to make the implicit normative self-estimations of contemporary avant-garde architecture explicit as norms. These norms may then be reinforced and amplified, or else might

2 Elegance is understood as the capacity to articulate complexity, and thus is always complementary and relative to the underlying complexity that needs to be articulated/communicated.

3 Ultimately, theoretical differences that make a difference are those that facilitate recommendations or injunctions with respect to design processes and with respect to the formulation of evaluative criteria of the resulting designs.

serve as points of departure for critique and transformation. The creative theoretical task of self-description is to achieve a strong *déjà vu* effect with new concepts, abstractions and analogies. Such a combination of variety and redundancy turns conceptual ‘lines of flight’⁴ into potential insights that might contribute to a new outlook that connects to current problems.

The book elaborates the theory of architecture’s autopoiesis in 12 parts (five parts within Vol 1 and seven parts in Vol 2), with 60 sections (24 in Vol 1 and 36 in Vol 2) and about 250 chapters. Each of the 60 sections presents a thesis that draws a central message from the insights articulated within the respective section. The 250 chapters gather and sort the accumulated intelligence of the discipline according to the new conceptual framework adopted, in order to elaborate the insights that are encapsulated in the theses. A full list of the theses is drawn together at the end as Appendix 2 and affords a convenient summary of the ‘results’ of the theory of architectural autopoiesis.

The endeavour towards a comprehensive theoretical system that offers itself to architecture as its self-description is undoubtedly unique within contemporary architecture. This very ambition is bound to polarize. Indeed, any systematization breeds criticism. If this endeavour has any merit, it might find defenders in an ensuing polemic. Theoretical unification can only be achieved as a result of controversy.

Intellectual Stepping Stones/Acknowledgements

This book was first envisioned about 15 years ago. The insights gathered and systematized here were accumulated over an even longer period. The book is thus a rather ripe fruit. Accordingly, the indebtedness of the author is wide-ranging and reaches far back in time. It includes influences that were only received via writings as well as many face to face communications, often embedded in long-term collaborations. The specific inspiration and most decisive theoretical source for this book come from outside the domain of architecture, from the work of the sociologist (and philosopher) Niklas Luhmann. More general intellectual influences from outside architecture include,⁵ among others, the works of Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel,

4 Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis), 1987, French original: *Mille Plateaux*, Les Editions de Minuit (Paris), 1980.

5 The names mentioned here do not necessarily feature in the references. They include authors who perhaps made a general contribution to the intellectual shape of *The Autopoiesis of Architecture* without always having been pinned down in a specific point of reference.