

Myths, Machines, and Words

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ABSTRACT

On the threshold of the deep epistemological cut of the post-modern era, the traditional architectural bulwarks that collapsed under the pressure of the avant-garde season open their gates to innovation both in technology and, above all, the theoretical needs in the discipline for managing the rich complexity of new horizons in science and society. Thus, to fill the gap inherited from the pioneers, in 1968, architecture, for centuries based on eminently constructive facts, had to deal with what was previously ascribed to other disciplines, marking a turning point. History, social claims, music, new natural and philosophical awareness, and, above all, language became the essential parts of the new debate.

<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/7794>

ISSN 2611-0075

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KEYWORDS

Language; natural history; society; books; movies.

There can be no doubt that many prohibitions exist only to enhance the power of those who can punish or pardon their transgression.

Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 1960

Myths

The Clash

In 1968, Paolo Ramundo, Gianfranco Molteni, and Martino Branca were studying architecture at the University La Sapienza in Rome. They became fascinated by the work of Francesco Borromini through the lectures performed by the young and passionate professor Paolo Portoghesi, who was a major researcher of Roman Baroque at the time.

According to one report, the three asked professor Manfredo Tafuri for permission to visit the renowned spire on top of the lantern of the church of San'Ivo alla Sapienza, but access was denied¹. On February 19, they, asked Portoghesi to guide them on the visit, and this time, thanks to his good relationships with the keepers—as he described it—access was granted. With a self-constructed staircase, the three succeeded in reaching the spire, and once atop it, they declared its occupation. They held the position for approximately thirty-six hours and became known as “gli Uccelli” (the “Birds”). This profoundly symbolic gesture is somehow remembered as the beginning of the 1968 Roman revolts, which reached the paroxysm a little more than a month later in the epic battle of Valle Giulia.

The university was stagnant, its curriculum obsolete and its governance strictly hierarchical and vertically structured. The teaching of architecture was based on programmes elaborated thirty years earlier in a dictatorial and war-planning cultural environment. Meanwhile, architectural theory was dealing with changes, embracing topics from politics, semiology, psychology, and the sciences to gradually turn them against the modern masters' beliefs.

Borromini embodied gracefully the master of exceptions and, from some points of view, could represent an epitome of revolt. Even Bruno Zevi—who cautiously supported the movement—in a tenacious article stated that Borromini (together with the partisans Terragni, Michelangelo or Wright) should have been celebrated for his subversive acts and that ancient and modern culture had always been woven with sudden creative and revolutionary movements, so it would have been useless if their incidence on society had been precluded².

Those were the years when the weakness of the straightforward and orthodox approach to architecture, advocated by the last disciples of modern architecture, was called into question by Robert Venturi. It is no coincidence if he repeatedly quotedd Borromini to show the beauty and

1. Paolo Brogi, *68, ce n'est qu'un début. Storie di un mondo in rivolta* (Reggio Emilia, Imprimatur 2017).

2. Bruno Zevi, “Apologia di reato” (editoriale) in *L'architettura. Cronache e Storia*, Anno XIV n. 4, Agosto 1968



FIG. 1 'Three students 'roosted' on the San'Ivo alla Sapienza dome during Roman students protests. Picture published on "Il resto del Carlino" on the February 21st, 1968.'

the legitimacy of an architecture founded on inclusiveness, complexity, and contradiction³. The graceful imperfection of an architecture that plays on both knowing and bending the rules was significantly more similar to the structure of human society than the straight, univocal, and subservient-to-the-masters modernist architecture.

The masters were old, some of them already dead, and, while still respected, only an austere monument of the past. Their legacy was too heavy to carry, similar to a lumbering father: oppressive, and out of date.

In 1966, Venturi published his milestone essay *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*; the same year Aldo Rossi debuted on the global stage with *The Architecture of the City*. In 1967, it was time for Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle*, and Che Guevara was executed in Bolivia soon becoming an icon of all the left-inspired revolts, proudly shown in posters, flags and t-shirts as a part of the revolutionary uniform. The image of his dead body was venerated much in the manner of Christ's on the Holy Shroud, while Debord was arguing about how every icon or slogan can be reduced—emptied of its ideological content through the detournement—to a mere tool of the spectacle. "Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation". In 1968, the Beatles *White Album* was released, and Siegfried Giedion died: the consecration of the pop language and the death of the elitist thinking of the main mythologist of the modern happened at the same time. In that year, even the more moderate social reformers Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated.

3. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradictions in Architecture*, *The Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

In July 1969, fifty years after the foundation of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius died in the United States; only one month later, Mies van der Rohe followed him. The two Germans who changed the American architecture more than anyone else were gone. But still, 1969 was the time for the New York Five, when modernism finally became univocally embraced: a scholarly exercise around forms and paradigms of the Modern Movement without any remnant of its social or moral issue that anyway never really interested Americans. That same year was the time for Manfredo Tafuri ideology and Jencks and Baird's semiology applied to architecture⁴. Architectural theory enriched itself with unprecedented instruments to state the meaning of forms, their legitimacy, their beauty, and finally the role they play in society; meanwhile, speech around the discipline become fragmentary, semantically various, developed according to different interpretations. No more grand narratives were left. Every theme was admitted in architectural speech, and every form in its practice: this was the beginning of post-modern thinking⁵.

Fundamentally, every established social and artistic order was being contested through the unprecedented awareness that several previously unquestioned prohibitions were only asserting power. There was no rational reason, neither nostalgic nor romantic, to bow one's head to the fathers' dogmas. Everything deserved to be experienced even if that meant risking engaging in an open and violent conflict, and if that meant facing the fear of losing the battle.

Here is the essence, strength, and unavoidable fascination of fighting orthodoxy: to claim the double significance of the taboo: not only blasphemous but also sacred. It deserves to be revealed and explored in its ambiguous and mysterious beauty.

Protests followed everywhere around the globe: youth against establishment, minorities against power, pluralism against orthodoxy, the pursuit of meaning against a given truth to be trusted. Everywhere is claimed—with violence when necessary—the right to transgress.

Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza was occupied in February 1968 and while in March, the battle of Valle Giulia took place. Milan Triennale was occupied right after its opening on May 30 while demonstrations, strikes, seizures and street guerrilla actions were taking place in Paris. That was also the time when the U.S., fights for human rights and demonstrations against the war in Vietnam were converging in large street parades and clashes.

¡No queremos olimpiadas, queremos revolución! was the shout in the streets of Mexico City, but the people's voice was soon silenced on October 2 in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco, the police opened fire on the protesters, killing hundreds of them. A couple of weeks later, the global uprising was ready to receive a new icon: Tommie Smith's and John Carlos' raised fists. Every stage of human activity, artistic, sportive or productive, held a political meaning: everyone had to be involved.

4. We here refer to Manfredo Tafuri, "Per una Critica dell'Ideologia Architettonica", *Contropiano* 1, Gennaio-Aprile 1969, Charles Jencks, "Semiology in Architecture", and George Baird, "La 'Dimensione Amoureuse' in Architecture", in *Meaning in Architecture* (New York: George Braziller, 1969).

5. We here refer to Jean Francois Lyotard's Grand Recit definition (in *La condition postmoderne*, 1979), which could be pertinent if retroactively applied to our dissertation.

Meanwhile, even the desirable alternative to a capitalist organisation of society, for some represented by the Soviet Union, suffered that year when Leonid Brezhnev authorized the suppression of the reformists in Czechoslovakia with a massive military invasion, soon tragically known as the Prague Spring.

Both the socialist and the capitalist systems revealed their dictatorial nature, suppressing both the individual and the people's will. The notion of a "system" itself was intended to be endemically tyrannical; the fight was then to be conducted against the system.

During that year, it became clear that every belief was to be questioned, every dogma to be doubted. There was no place left for ministers of any faith, but only for prophets of the revolution. Any leading position and any history that tried to reconstruct the complex nature of the facts from a univocal point of view were considered illegitimate. A disenchanted awareness posited that history had never been a straightforward narration of events, but rather a partial story reconstructed on ideological premises to support the powerful and to deny the relevance of others. Those who had been side-lined laid claim to, at least, being cited. No history should serve power, but rather should engage the social clash.

On the architectural side, Charles Jencks revealed the deeper intents of the major historians and theorists of architecture in his *History as Myth* (1969): at its very beginning we read Oscar Wilde's emblematic statement "The only duty we owe to history is to rewrite it", which seems a highly appropriate way to embody what we meant to be 1968's spirit.

The myth is here intended not as logical reasoning but as a sequence of associated metaphoric images, elaborated to justify and validate the social order. It is not something to be questioned to demonstrate its falsity, but rather to understand the reasons for its permanence and persuasive capability. The myth is often that cultural common ground on which a community could agree in linking an object to its meaning. What is therefore suggested is that without the myth, there is no society, but at the same time "no group of meaning, neither any myth is sufficient or conclusive for mankind"⁶.

Jencks' work describes the partial view of many faithful mythographers of architecture. Pevsner, Giedion, Hitchcock, Banham, Zevi or Scully, he says, found their critics on precise mythemes, in relationship to which they form a judgment about architecture. Gropius is chosen as a paradigm by Pevsner or Giedion since the mythemes were identified as rationality, standardization and "sachlichkeit", as parts of the leading myth of the zeitgeist, while, remaining faithful to other myths, Zevi promoted Wright or Scully Kahn.

What became clear was the process of posthumous attribution of meanings, values, and ideologies to most of the architects' work: "the

6. Jencks, "History as Myth" in *Meaning in Architecture*, George Braziller, New York 1969

historian can invent any theory about works of art, in which he will later believe to have discovered its foundation”⁷. This process was not a fault itself since the historian had the right, actually the duty, to express a judgment. What was then to be admitted was the partial, subjective, ideological, and often partisan will of any critic, which implied an interpretation that probably did not correspond to the author’s original intention.

7. Ibid.

What Jencks was pointing out was that architecture was substantially an image. It was an image of rationality, instead of rationality itself, and in the same way a representation of the function, organicism, order, democracy, dictatorship, or honest construction; an image that would not mean anything without a myth to provide an interpretation, and that moreover could never be univocal. The meaning of architecture as an image could not be endemic, but arbitrary and posthumously attributed.

But what if the 1968 revolutionary spirit became a myth itself? And what if that happened at the precise moment in which the movement simply stated the end of any leading myth? Could architecture become in any way its image? How can architecture represent a vast street parade, a riot, a demonstrator beaten by police or a neighbourhood set on fire?

As soon as the revolution became a myth itself, it clearly emerged that architecture could not represent it; it might not be too hasty to say that, not being able to take part, architecture turned back to watch itself more carefully.

It is no coincidence that the more representative realizations of the radical culture in the field of architecture were programmatically unbuildable projects, emptied of a precise political aim, similar to those of Cedric Price, Archigram, Superstudio, and Archizoom.

“Forbidden to forbid” was the perfect motto, simultaneously reclaiming supreme freedom and imposing the strictest rule. It was both hopeful and nihilistic. In architecture, it opened the way for demanding the possibility to include multiple references, experimentations, eclectic or exotic citations from something far in time or space. But eclecticism and contradictions are the perfect antitheses to ideology.

When the global uprising movement turned in that sense, it inevitably lost its initial revolutionary impulse, soon to become reversed in its original will, a spectacle. Any slogan, as Guy Debord predicted, could not become other than a spectacle when ideology itself becomes a mere representation.

In 1969, the most crucial aspirations of both the establishment and the antagonist movement finally reached their realization. In that year, the first man set foot on the moon before astonished humanity, connected worldwide and live to the greatest ceremony of human progress of all time. Only a month later, at sunrise on August 18, Jimi Hendrix took to the stage at Woodstock, concluding with a brilliant performance at this

significant countercultural event. Nothing could ever go further.

Some months later, on December 6, some tried to repeat the format of a massive music festival in Altamont. Three hundred thousand people were expected to take part. But this time, the city of peaceful coexistence of an unregulated mass, united by the same passionate spirit, tragically failed. Meredith Hunter, an 18-year-old black man, dressed in a dandy green suit, was stabbed to death by a member of the Hell's Angels, while probably pulling a gun during the Rolling Stone's performance.

Writing on the *New Yorker* in 2015, Richard Brody stated that what Altamont ended was "the idea that, left to their inclinations and stripped of the trappings of the wider social order, the young people of the new generation will somehow spontaneously create a higher, gentler, more loving grassroots order. What died at Altamont is the Rousseauian dream itself".⁸

8. Richard Brody, "What Died at Altamont", *The New Yorker*, March 11, 2015.

When the revolution became a myth, it gained, even unconsciously or involuntarily, its ministers and uniforms, moved from streets to events, left its legacy either to be honoured, tuned into a spectacle or, worse, left to fight against itself. It surely did not have all its anticipated political success, but it had been undoubtedly a crucial cultural turning point, mostly as the highest moment of a global movement. For some moments, it seemed that a revolutionary zeitgeist pervaded indiscriminately different social groups united in will, aspiration, and ideology in a profound, while entirely generic, search for freedom.

During the demonstrations, many iconic flyers were passed out; one by the student movement in Bologna showed a threatening and inflexible fist hitting the tympanum of a classical temple from the top. The cracked temple represented government, church, industry, television, magistrature, trade unions, and the revisionist opposition; the fist was the merger of students and the working class.

The battle was fought on unequal fields, and the movement was undoubtedly not able to tear the entire temple of the system down but revealed, even if for a brief moment, its weak points, its contradictions, its orthodox injustice. The insurrection revealed most of all the right to transgress as the sacred mystery of the cult. Having access to the taboo was not a capital sin anymore.

Many of the protesters ended up finding a place inside the hated system, and many artistic disciplines turned their gaze away from social and political issues, unable to handle the involvement anymore, towards a reflection on themselves, but they gained from that year a lightning and radical twist. Those were the ones "who fell on their knees in hopeless cathedrals praying for each other's salvation and light and breasts, until the soul illuminated its hair for a second"⁹.

9. Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*, in *Howl and other poems* (Pocket Poets Series, City Lights Books, San Francisco 1956).

Machines

The Prophecy of Samuel Butler

Erewhon: or Over the Range is a novel by Samuel Butler published anonymously in 1872¹⁰. The central chapters of this book focus on a theme that most interested the author: the relationship between men and machines in the context of rapid technological development.

The reflections on this topic were inspired by two facts, the spread of the theories of Charles Darwin and the social and technological implications of the Second Industrial Revolution. This second topic is exemplified by the *Great Eastern*, a giant ship designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel and launched on 31 January 1858.

In *Erewhon*, Butler summarizes two different attitudes towards progress and technological development. In the novel, these attitudes are attributed to different people, but in the real world, both can be traced to previous works by the same author.

When he was living in New Zealand, Butler wrote several articles on Darwinian topics, two of which, “Darwin Among the Machines”¹¹ and “Lucubratio Ebria”¹², were later reworked to become two chapters of the novel *Erewhon*. Both essays focused on the same problem: the relationship between mechanical and biological evolution. In the former, published under the pseudonym of Cellarius, Butler imagines the consequences of a society in which machines are considered living organisms competing with man in the struggle for existence. Here, the machines are seen as potentially alien to animals and plants. It is significant that in this context, Butler uses expressions such as “mechanical life”, “the mechanical kingdom”, and “the mechanical world”. He imagines that men must develop a new awareness of the necessity to develop a discipline that studies the evolution of mechanical life.

We regret deeply that our knowledge both of natural history and of machinery is too small to enable us to undertake the gigantic task of classifying machines into the genera and sub-genera, species, varieties, and sub-varieties, and so forth, of tracing the connecting links between machines of widely different characters, of pointing out how subservience to the use of man has played that part among machines which natural selection has performed in the animal and vegetable kingdom, of pointing out rudimentary organs which exist in some few machines, feebly developed and perfectly useless, yet serving to mark descent from some ancestral type which has either perished or been modified into some new phase of mechanical existence¹³.

Starting from these premises, the author warns the reader against the danger that the evolution of “mechanical life” can become a threat to

10. Samuel Butler, *Erewhon. Or Over the Range* (London: Trübner & Co, 1872).

11. Samuel Butler [Cellarius] (1863), “Darwin among the Machines”, *Press*, June 13, 1863; reprinted in *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler. Author of “Erewhon”*, ed. Henry Festing Jones (London: Ac Fifeild, 1913): 42–46.

12. Butler, “Lucubratio Ebria”, *Press*, 29 July 1865; reprinted in *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler*, 47–53.

13. Butler [Cellarius], “Darwin among the Machines”, 42–46.

humanity.

In “Lucubratio Ebria” (1865), he takes the opposite side: he ironically defines as a mistake “to consider the machines as identities, to animalise them, and to anticipate their final triumph over mankind”. Instead, the machines are to be regarded as the mode of development by which the human organism is most especially advancing. They are extra-corporeal limbs and “more of these a man can tack on to himself the more highly evolved an organism he will be”. Every fresh invention is, therefore, a new resource of the human body.

In *Erewhon*, the two articles are summarized in the context of a fictional story. The country Butler imagined has refused the machines and, with them, progress itself. However, he also imagines that in the past, there was an author with a different point of view regarding the relationship between mechanisms and life. This fictional author said that machines were to be regarded as a part of man’s physical nature, being really nothing but extra-corporeal limbs, “according to this conception man can be considered as a ‘machinate mammal’”.¹⁴

The lower animals keep all their limbs at home in their own bodies, but many of man’s are loose and lie about detached, now here and now there, in various parts of the world... A machine is merely a supplementary limb; this is the be all and end all of machinery. We do not use our own limbs other than as machines; and a leg is only a much better wooden leg than anyone can manufacture¹⁵.

If gigantic machines such as the *Great Eastern* evoked fears of a revolt of the machines against their creators, the optimistic side of device-based progress is based on the existence of an entirely different kind of mechanism: “The present machines are to the future as the early Saurians to man. The largest of them will probably greatly diminish in size. Some of the lowest vertebrate attained a much greater bulk than has descended to their more highly organised living representatives”¹⁶.

Butler’s complex vision about the relationship between men and machines aroused some attention when *Erewhon* was published. However, particularly during the first decades of the twentieth century, machinery was seen as a positive agent of societal change more than a possible threat to human civilization. The Modern Movement of Architecture



FIG. 2 Selected frames from *Barbarella*, a science fiction movie directed by Roger Vadim, released on October 1968 and based on the comic series of the same name by Jean-Claude Forest.¹

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

represents a dramatic shift in the design of buildings, founded on a theoretical framework that considered mechanization an essential condition for the improvement of human environments. Only in the sixties did the crisis of this peculiar conception of modernity reopen the critical debate on the dichotomy that Butler had investigated about a hundred years before. Confidence in the machine as a positive agent of progress is replaced by the question of which type of machinery can best adapt to the development of human societies.

The author who has investigated more consistently these arguments since the early 1960s is certainly the British critic and architectural historian Reyner Banham. One of the most effective summaries of these topics can be found in an article titled “Triumph of Software”, published in *New Society*¹⁷. The article talks about two science fiction films released in the same year: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (directed by Stanley Kubrick, release date April 1968) and *Barbarella* (directed by Roger Vadim, release date October 1968). *Erewhon* was set in an imaginary country, and the two films are set in the future. A common element in all three works is the investigation of the relationship between men, machines and the environment.

Banham interprets the release of *Barbarella*, only a few months after Kubrick’s *2001*, as the significant sign of a change in the way we conceive relationships between mechanical and architectural elements: “By one of those splendid coincidences that used to make German historians believe in the *Zeitgeist* (and which English historians always miss) the film was premiered here in the same week that a company called Responsive Environments Corporation went public on the New York stock exchange”¹⁸. We have little information about the Responsive Environments Corporation, but we know that the English critic was interested in the development of lightweight, often inflatable, structures able to “provide everybody with their own habitable bubble of innocence”¹⁹.

According to Banham, both *Barbarella* and *Archigram* were contributing to making inconceivable the survival of the “artefact-city”. *Archigram* was progressively abandoning its megacity visions in favour of ever more compact, adaptable, and self-contained living capsules. *Barbarella* shows many aspects of inflatable structures. “She sleeps (lit and photographed from below) on a transparent membrane that dimples to her form. The sails of the ice yacht become erectile when the wind blows, and the fur-trimmed tumble takes place in the yacht’s translucent “tail”²⁰.

In 1968, the eighth issue of *Archigram Magazine* was published, and in its pages are many references to inflatable structures. In an article titled “Mike Webb: Popular Pak. Comfort for Two”, there is a diagram of two Suitaloons combining into one, and this was the first appearance of the Suitaloon in *Archigram*. A few pages later appears an article titled “Hard Soft. Hard and Soft-Ware” that contains an explicit statement: “In systems

17. Reyner Banham, “Triumph of Software”, *New Society*, October 31 1968; reprinted in *Design by Choice*, ed. Penny Sparke (London: Academy Editions, 1981), 56–60.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

planning we are reaching a point where the statement 'the software' is sufficient to organise the right (control of/positioning of) arrangement of an environment. This oversimplification has the air—and necessity—of rhetoric at a particular moment in history"²¹.

The entire magazine is full of examples of inflatable structures. The explicit intention is to blur the line between mechanical and biological systems. The Suitaloon is an exemplary case study: a biological organism and its mechanical enclosure interacting as one. It is therefore not by chance that Banham interpreted both the film and the magazine as two expressions of the same *zeitgeist*: "Barbarella is about responsive environments, of one sort or another, and so has been the architectural underground for the last three years or so"²².

According to Banham, *Barbarella* had become a cult movie ever since the first stills were published in *Playboy*. A few years later (1972), the same magazine published an article on inflatable structures built by a company that, unlike the Responsive Environments Corporation, had strong links with the architectural culture of that period. The April 1972 issue of *Playboy* includes an article titled "The Bubble House: A Rising Market. Playboy Reports on a Portable Pleasure Dome with Inflationary Proportions"²³.

This "portable pleasure dome" was created by a Los Angeles design group named Chrysalis. The group was founded in 1968 by some of Archigram's UCLA associates (Chris Dawson and Alan Stanton, joined the next year by Mike Davies). They named it Chrysalis after the natural exemplar for an "architectural interface"²⁴.

In the Richard Fish's photographs that accompany the *Playboy* article, Banham's famous "prophecy" in his famous 1965 essay "A Home Is Not a House" seems to come to life.

...a properly set-up standard-of-living package, breathing out warm air along the ground..., radiating soft light and Dionne Warwick in heart-warming stereo, with well-aged protein turning in an infra-red glow in the rotisserie, and the ice-maker discreetly coughing cubes into glasses on the swing-out bar—this could do something for a woodland glade or creek-side rock that Playboy could never do for its penthouse.

[...]

The car, in short, is already doing quite a lot of the standard-of-living package's job—the smoochy couple dancing to the music of the radio in their parked convertible have created a ballroom in the wilderness (dance floor by courtesy of the Highway Dept. of course), and all this is paradisaic till it starts to rain. Even then, you're not licked—it takes very little air pressure to inflate a transparent Mylar air dome, the conditioned-air output of your mobile package

21. "Hard Soft. Hard and Soft-Ware" (Editorial), *Archigram Magazine*, no. (1968).

22. Banham, "Triumph of Software".

23. "The Bubble House: A Rising Market", *Playboy* 19, no. 4 (April 1972): 117–119. Photography by Richard Fish.

24. Simon Sadler, *Archigram. Architecture without Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005).

might be able to do it. With or without a little boosting, and the dome itself, folded into a parachute pack, might be part of the package²⁵.

25. Reyner Banham, "A Home Is Not a House", *Art in America* (April 1965): 133–136.

This short excerpt from Banham's essay on *Barbarella* (particularly the scene of the ice yacht) and the *Playboy* article tell the same story and ask the same question: will the architecture of the future be capable of adapting itself to the transformation of society with regard to changes in living habits and the search for a different relationship between man and natural environment?

In 1968, Banham finds in *Barbarella* a shred of evidence that popular culture is also adapting itself to a new conception of the machine. The intention was to re-establish modernity, overcoming the limits of the "classical age" of the International Style, without indulging in a conservative or nostalgic attitude towards the past.

The British critic, however, is aware that it is not possible to ignore the second hypothesis expressed more than a century earlier by Samuel Butler; 1968 was also the year of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Banham briefly talks about the film as a "Pompeii re-excavated, the kind of stuff that Richard Hamilton had in his *Man, Machine, and Motion* exhibition back in 1955. All that grey plastic and crackle-finish metal, and knobs and switches, all that...yech...hardware!"²⁶ His attention is rather directed towards *Barbarella* as "the first post-hardware SF movie of any consequence"²⁷.

26. Banham, "Triumph of Software".

27. Ibid.

However, one cannot underestimate the fact that Kubrick's movie is a reflection on the relationship between man and machine that illustrates the ideas Butler had already expressed in 1863. If the giant ship *Great Eastern* was at the origin of Butler's fears, the gigantic spaceship *Discovery One* becomes the scenography and the protagonist of the staging of the rebellion of machine against man. According to this perspective, "the monolith triggers the functioning of a certain kind of evolutionary law, a Darwinian struggle for survival that is continually, problematically figured by Kubrick as a clash between dominant males"²⁸. In the same way, the second appearance of the monolith triggers the violence of artificial intelligence towards its creator.

28. Susan White, "Kubrick's Obscene Shadows" in *Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. New Essays*, ed. Robert Kolker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 127–146.

HAL 9000, at least in the first part of the film, is a machine that takes care of human beings and regulates the environment in which they live. This role is emphasized by his soft voice and in "his 'maternal' care-taking of the astronauts (his attentiveness to their needs, playing chess, validating Dave's creativity and sharing his feelings)"²⁹. But in any case, HAL is a machine that does not improve the functionality of the human body but rather ends up limiting its vitality, as symbolized by the part of the crew kept unconscious, in cryogenic stasis, for the entire movie.

29. Marcia Landy, "The Cinematographic Brain in 2001: A Space Odyssey", in *Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. New Essays*, 87–104.

In *L'Anti-Oedipe* (1972), Deleuze and Guattari grasp the profound relevance of Butler's text and try to go beyond his point of view. According

to the two French scholars, Butler drives both arguments beyond their very limits. “He shatters the vitalist argument by calling in question the specific or personal unity of the organism, and the mechanist argument even more decisively, by calling in question the structural unity of the machine”³⁰. However, in recent years, the debate on artificial intelligence and technological singularity is growing, and the words of Samuel Butler, as well as those of Reyner Banham, can help us grasp the complexity of a debate that has been running for about a century and a half.

30. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe* (Les Editions de Minuit, 1972); reprinted as *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

Words

“Alles ist Architektur”

In what is probably his most famous claim, the Czech art historian Mojmír Horyna compared baroque Santini-Aichel’s masterpiece—the Church at Zelená Hora—to a poem, specifying that twentieth-century buildings are really only slogans.

Far from taking advantage of those words to criticise the development of shapes in the last century, Horyna’s sharp remark proves to be interesting from a slightly different point of view. The idea of buildings as slogans immediately brings to mind the famous Venturi sketch, in which a shed with a billboard declaring “I’m a monument” tries to gain architectural status. Notwithstanding that the Venturian example is the slogan-building par excellence, the Horyna remark reveals another key if we shift it from the architectural works to the theory of architecture.

Indeed, taken from the buildings to the words, the idea of a building representing a slogan has a great deal to do with the history of the architectural theory of the last century, shifting from its metaphorical attributes to a more literal meaning. In fact, it is possible to pick out several analogies that permit us to imagine not only—as Horyna noted—buildings as slogans, but also buildings grounded in slogans (which, in turn, will feel the need to become slogans themselves).

At first glance, these statements present us with a conundrum, sounding like an awkward and difficult way to paint the architectural customs of that period: how could an edifice be grounded in a few blunt pairs of words, and later become a slogan itself?

To a certain extent, however, the slogan seems to be one of the leading tools of the architectural theory of the XX century, finding a turning point in the 1968 movements and cultural climate. In other words, the answer to that puzzle causes us to consider and follow the slogan as a driving force with the power to overturn through the language architectural theory as well as the built shapes, taking control and leading the disciplinary development in a thorny slice of history.

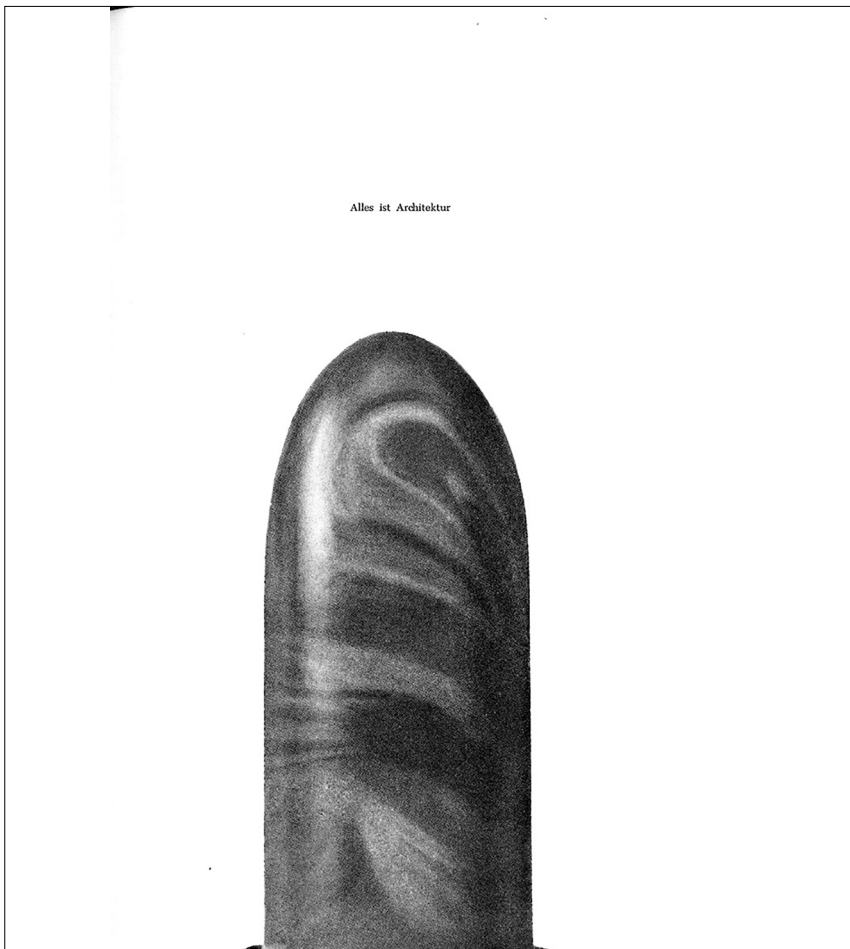


FIG. 3 Hans Hollein, *Alles ist Architektur*, Bau. Schrift für Architekt...

Born literally as a battle cry—the word originates from *slogorn*, an Anglicisation derived from the Scottish Gaelic and Irish term *sluagh-ghairm* (a combination of “army”, *sluagh*, and “cry”, *ghairm*)—the slogan comes across as a real weapon. Indeed, its ability to hit sharply and profoundly is the measure of its success. Of course, this application is not actually new. The strength of the words was already compared to those of the sword in the Bible. Just think of the well-known paragraph in the *Wisdom of Sirach* [28:18] to see how it reflects upon this comparison both in theory and through use, thanks to the aphoristic form of the paragraph.

Thus, an appealing, concise, and memorable phrase ready to pour out on to the crowd—the new society demanding culture—is the perfect tool for managing the idea of change claimed by the 1968 cultural movements. Certainly not aphoristic like those of the Bible, these had to be words by the crowd for the crowd itself: ironic, provocative and, above all, pervasive: revolutionary words.

Before proceeding, however, we should underline that the revolution they were trying to trigger was mainly cultural and it was not only the importation of interpretative models of a social and political crisis, as shown by the blend and cross-origin of its actors as much as by the different objectives of the movements in every country. Their goal was to persuade members of the public and the new order to produce culturally

through the transposition of a new collective imagination filtered by an innovative style of communication. Even though at first this appears outwardly firstly politically based, it was in fact driven by new ethical and epistemological needs.

Thus, it is clear that slogans have the makings of becoming the best weapons for leading those revolutionary purposes, pursuing the yearnings for freedom and new ways of life. Furthermore, this makes rather obvious how the overwhelming cultural mood of that period tainted the language, jargon, and theoretical background of almost every art form. In fact, unquestionably, in such a cultural turmoil, it would be no wonder if some branches of architecture had been lured into the revolutionary maelstrom, applying its jargon and following its customs.

Nevertheless, the employment of slogans was not new for the architectural debate, which had already marked the dispute of the first half of the century. In this respect, although slogans have certainly marked a turning point in architectural debate thanks to the cultural climate of 1968, those events could be read on the horizon of architectural debate as part of the same dynamic that it was intended to challenge. More precisely, it is possible to identify in that phenomena the last extreme act of fifty years of *pars-destruens* and the first steps of the climate that pave the way to the post-modern era, a sort of spark of a new *pars-construens*.

Le Corbusier's well-known slogan "*Architecture ou Revolution*" epitomizes the trend of the previous fifty-year-long *pars-destruens* period. A look backward to focus on that fifty-year course of destruction of past values is similar to taking a step back to get a broader view.

Many interpreters have emphasized that the book *Vers une Architecture*, in which the threatening LeCorbuserian slogan appeared as the title of the last chapter, is offered as a rare example of the architectural treatise of the twenty-first century, although it was not entirely unique to the situation.

Admittedly, Le Corbusier's mastery in tailoring books is undisputed. His insightfulness in juxtaposing sharp and peremptory verbal formulas to images evoking a new and thrilling iconographic universe playing on semantic leaps and perceptual shocks was a milestone to the treatises of art and architectural history.

Despite the apparent suspicion expressed against the language of avant-garde movements—think of, for example, the dogmatic Mies Van der Rohe's precept "build, don't talk"—the broad use of slogans was, however, functional to the practice of the very character of the architect, albeit indeed only in a sibylline way.

The famous 1965 article "A Home Is Not a House" was a bridge between the modernist revolution and the ripe 1960s. In that article, Reyner Banham criticises the uselessness of their slogans "in coping with the mechanical invasion", listing the main ones, such as "Form Follows

Function”, “accusez la structure”, “Firmness Commodity and Delight”, “Truth to Materials” or “*Weniger ist Mehr*”³¹.

Those sibylline mottos were in fact not actually directly part of the “proverbial wisdom of the profession”—in Banham’s words—as operating intentions. Indeed, the famous mottos ceaselessly declaimed by modern architectural pioneers are flawless catchphrases calling on architects to perform the role of the prophet they had carved out for themselves in society.

As the political theory scholar David Milne noted, those mottos—in particular, of course, Le Corbusier’s “*Architecture ou Revolution*”—reveal how their authors believed that they possessed a clear political role, a sort of social investiture³². Therefore, they conformed to the role, performing the character of seer-artist, with the claim to be “makers of the age”. Their mission was to lead society to the dawn of a new age through architecture as the “unified synthesis for which men had been yearning ever since the Enlightenment”³³. Consequently, they needed impressive slogans that sounded as much pompous as oracular and trenchant to nimbly spread their vision of the new world, seemingly demolishing the old one.

Indeed, according to Milne, the seed for much of the twentieth-century architecture heroic theory and performance lies simply “in the assumed congruence between the aesthetic and the political and moral”, rooted in ideas going back at least to Schiller, if not to Plato³⁴. His studies unveil, in point of fact, how the masters of modern architecture, behind the mask of thaumaturgical agents of the future, concealed the same theoretical scheme of their immediate predecessors. The nostalgic cult of the poetic hero, embodied in this case by the architect, the artist as society’s mentor “who might lead the mass where the mass itself could not successfully go”, is a quintessential romantic element on which they even grafted of Hegelian historiography³⁵.

In essence, Milne shows that the would-be architectural radicals and revolution at the dawn of the twentieth century were not much different from those whom they were struggling against, using the language even before the facts—a practice in which they shone. Therefore, their rhetoric was firmly grounded in a romantic atmosphere that should have looked starkly worn out to their eyes. This aspect became blatant when historians placed such rhetoric into historical perspective, despite that this view had been hindered by the enthusiastic reaction to the bold shapes of what appeared as a “new architectural epoch”³⁶. However, such excitement over the new buildings combined with the hieratic figure raised around the modern architects—hybrids between a scientist and a new epoch’s high priest—permitted them to follow their revolutionary credo.

As unequalled communication masters, their revolutionary strategy was pursued with slogans and statements, making a clean slate of the values of their age and, of course, of those of the previous periods. Indeed,

31. Banham, “A Home is Not a House”: 70–79.

32. David Milne, “The Artist as Political Hero: Reflections on Modern Architectural Theory”, *Political Theory* 8, no. 4 (1980): 525–45.

33. *Ibid.*: 527.

34. *Ibid.*: 530.

35. *Ibid.*: 529.

36. *Ibid.*: 526.

the originality displayed by the masters of the modern, a purely romantic invention itself, gave them a growing credibility.

Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion is a classic example of the application of this strategy. Its sophisticated asymmetry of shimmering columns and bright marble walls, the large panes of glass and the refined squared-off and polished details, make the Pavilion a model of "sublime rationality" studied by generations of architects³⁷. However, as Robin Evans claimed, the only reasons for thinking of the Barcelona Pavilion as a rational building were "Mies said it was, and it looks as if it is"³⁸. This view is possible due to the misleading idea of rationality being rooted in our culture, which confers the pure rational characteristic only to objects that look rectilinear, regular, abstract, and flat. Mies flawlessly took advantage of this opportunity.

Thus, while their caustic slogans were destroying what they considered an obsolete world, through its own cultural tools, the new "rational" buildings of the future were grounded in those destructive utterances. Therefore, the slogans and the exclusionary behaviour of the pioneers of modern architecture succeeded in making a void, opposing the past with new values and ways of understanding the dwelling, art, the world, and life.

By the process of elimination, further than the classical architectural shapes, their strategy wiped out from the horizon centuries of theoretical tradition in architecture. The goal was achieved, and an illusory clean break with the past was marked. Downstream of such a cut lies a telling emptiness, the outcome of the sway of rationality and function.

It is precisely in that emptiness that the bases for the second revolution that architecture saw in the twentieth century lie, grafted on that odd phenomenon called with the name of a year without being strictly delimited by it: 1968.

At that moment, the slogans once again played a key role, as is well known. In obtaining this, the complicity of the last significant avant-garde movement is undeniable. Indeed, the Situationist International (SI) was broadly recognized as nourishment to the highly imaginative riots started within the famous French May.

More than every other avant-garde movement, the Situationist, led by Guy Debord, made of slogans and aphorisms tools of conflict, mainly against the elitist character of artistic creation, which they consider a sort of impassable barrier to personal communication. In their opinion, the art in those conditions is only a static element that freezes the flow of time and kills the lived experiences, enveloping them in a sort of empty eternity. Instead, the Situationist theory sees the situation as a tool for the liberation of everyday life that it aims to make exciting, following real subversive aesthetics in ideal connection with the extinct Surrealism. For

37. Robins Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays, AA Documents 2* (London: Architectural Association, 1997), 244.

38. *Ibid.*: 242.

this reason, with the aim to free the arts from the contemporary social order they propose to follow multiple directions, such as the game, the shock, the *détournement*, and the manipulation of art itself through the reuse of scraps of texts out of their original context, evoking different, bizarre, and alienating meanings. Thus, their provocative behaviour and their habit of grafting the contexts legitimized and promoted the blending of a new mass culture with the traditional elitist high culture.

Against a communication system with a few tightly controlled channels, the leaflets would not suffice: so, the walls of Paris spoke directly, making the constructed surface an improper means of communication for the revolutionary claims. This use ignited a challenge that transforms into *impromptu dazibaos* the Paris beaux-arts buildings despite themselves. In fact, during the May 1968 events in France, quotations from the key situationist books—mostly from the prophetic Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967)—were written on the walls of Paris. Then, in a matter of a few weeks, that graffiti came into view, not only in Paris, but on walls all over the world with other slogans such as “*Il est interdit d’interdire*” or “*Sous les pavés, la plage*”, clearly influenced by the Situationist's experience. Precisely like the Situationist's way, a sort of cutting-edge desire of multiplicity and mixing was utterly rife with every cultural environment. Indeed, the positive outlook after a decade since the end of World War I, the significant expansion of the educational system, the economic improvement in many countries, the substantial limitation of personal freedom in others, caused a need for changing above all on cultural horizons and in costumes. In particular, as noted previously, the new mass culture loudly demanded an adaptation of old social dynamics, bringing about a profound epistemological and aesthetic gap.

What remained of the great utopias of the historical artistic avant-gardes was looked upon with a detached and consciously disillusioned gaze. Of course, the wishes of a cultural reconstruction tainted the architectural debate, under the light of the increasing awareness of complexity that grew in scientific and philosophical environments. This perception swiftly made tight and stifling the emptiness and the aut-aut, black or white, climate of the pioneers, as Venturi declared in his famous *Gentle Manifesto* (1966): “Architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture”³⁹.

The emptiness due to that orthodoxy began to fill up with a new theoretical reconstruction beyond the pioneers' destructive slogans, but more than ever with the language's complicity. This aspect is pointed out by the contribution in the reconstruction of “non-architectural” intellectuals such as Jurgen Habermas, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, each committed to semiology, philosophy, and media studies. In particular, as Lavin points out, “these authors can be said to have had the deepest transformative effects on architectural discourse”⁴⁰.

39. Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*: 16.

40. Sylvia Lavin, “Theory into History; Or, the Will to Anthology”. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999): 494–99.

Thus architecture, for centuries based on eminently constructive facts, had to deal with what was previously ascribed to other disciplines, triggering that “stormy controversy that has consistently surrounded the theorization of architecture since the 1960s is the conflict over engagement with ideas and concepts developed in other fields”⁴¹.

41. *Ibid.*

Notwithstanding in the traditional architectural treatises, there were strictly various obligations towards specific disciplinary orthodoxy and, of course, a particular jargon. Those bulwarks collapsed under the pressure both of innovation in technology and above all the theoretical needs in the discipline to manage the rich complexity of the new horizons. Indeed, according to Michael Hays, thanks to that climate, “architecture theory has freely and contentiously set about opening up architecture to what is thinkable and sayable in other codes, and, in turn, rewriting systems of thought assumed to be properly extrinsic or irrelevant into architecture’s own idiolect”⁴².

42. K. Michael, Hays, ed., *Architecture Theory since 1968*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), XI.

Echoing the Dada Cabaret Voltaire, artists for whom everything is art, Hans Hollein in 1968 summarized the new fleeing and overwhelming enthusiasm of architectural theory once again in a slogan: now “*Alles ist Architektur*”⁴³.

43. Hans Hollein, “Alles ist Architektur”, *Bau. Schrift für Architektur und Städtebau* 20, no. 1–2 (1968): XXIII, 1–32. (every year, Hollein numbered *Bau*’s first issue 1).