

Fulcrum

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the jargon of inauthenticity.

p.illner

"Modernism was founded on the concept of space. Parametricism differentiates fields. Fields are full, as if filled with a fluid medium. We might think of liquids in motion, structured by radiating waves, laminal flows, and spiralling eddies. Swarms have also served as paradigmatic analogues for the field-concept.

We would like to think of swarms of buildings that drift across the landscape. Or we might think of large continuous interiors like open office landscapes or big exhibition halls of the kind used for trade fairs. Such interiors are visually infinitely deep and contain various swarms of furniture coalescing with the dynamic swarms of human bodies."

Patrik Schumacher
(*Parametricist Manifesto*, 2008)

Even if mainstream Anglo-American culture still cultivates a certain animosity towards 'the abstract', preferring the transparency of the supposedly 'concrete', contemporary architectural discourse features an ever-increasing proliferation of abstractions. This is especially evident in the rise of parametric architecture and its theoretical figurehead Patrik Schumacher, [author of *Fulcrum* #19, ed.] who opposes architecture's modernist vocabulary of lines, angles and firm geometrical shapes with a rhetoric of flows, networks and constant differentiation.

Schumacher's fluid imagery represents a trend in architectural theory towards ever more vitalist concepts to describe the generation of form. Together with an inflationary use of theories by Deleuze and Whitehead in their interpretations by Brian Massumi and Manuel Delanda, these new abstractions posit architecture as a quasi-evolutionary, self-generating force that infinitely extends its inherent complexity into evermore distinct shapes, tailor-made for urban dwellers, similarly framed as infinitely mobile, flexible and adaptive.

Now, while abstraction in architecture is obviously nothing new, it is interesting to question a historically specific set of concepts and ask why it arises.

If classical aesthetic theory saw abstraction as the teleological horizon of any medium, the legacy of Critical Theory allows us to establish a link between aesthetic and economic form. For Adorno, the abstractions of modern art therefore could not be separated from capitalism's exchange abstraction that homogenises qualitatively different entities under a universal quantitative principle. How then are we to understand parametric architecture's jubilant jargon of autopoietic, self-generating form in the light of economics?

Taking Adorno's lead, I argue that it is through the concept of autopoiesis, so prominent in Schumacher's work, that architecture reveals a structural analogy to the ways in which value is created in today's financial markets. Initially developed in biology to describe the dynamic 'self-creation' of cell structures, 'autopoiesis' is today widely used in contemporary aesthetic as well as economic discourse to denote the self-production of a closed system, independent of other systems.

Adapting this framework to architecture, Schumacher describes the spirit of Parametricism as an endless variation on design, in which form is created through an incessant re-organisation and re-folding of matter in an "autonomous network or autopoietic system of communications." Similarly, the breathtaking extension of finance capital that, since the 1980's, constitutes Western economies' main source of income has established finance as a self-fuelling, quasi-automatic process. In financial operations like Credit Default Swaps, derivatives, and the universal trading of debt, value is thus created through the speculative recombination of existing data-sets that, once in place, autopoietically extend into the future, needing nothing but the auto-correction of their own feedback loops to thrive.

In both finance and architecture, production is believed to occur freely and intrinsically out of itself.

Interestingly, both disciplines now make abundant use of algorithmic programmes that automate the form generation / value production process according to feasibility thresholds or risk assessment standards.

However, this ideal of frictionless production where money and form are created in the blink of an eye quickly reveals its violent underside as finance capital's hyper-production is only rendered possible by hitherto unseen austerity policies in the social-reproductive sector. In a recent essay, Loren Goldner has characterised the phase of autopoietic neoliberalism as the era of capitalism's 'self-cannibalisation' since the investment into fictitious, speculative capital goes hand-in-hand with an enormous divestment of the means of basic social reproduction. Thus the thirty years of neoliberal rule have been accompanied by widespread deindustrialisation, the lowering of wages (resulting in a situation where workers are not paid enough to reproduce their own labour power), a concomitant increase in private debt, the ongoing privatisation of health care, education and pensions, a public infrastructure left to rot (at least in the U.S) and the near-complete depletion of natural resources. The flip side of finance's fantastical productive power is thus a generalised condition of real social non-reproduction. In the face of this massive exploitation of a population deemed superfluous, the vitalist discourses of both finance, as well as architecture, can only appear like the last hysteric spasms of a body already half dead.

Since the financial crisis took full effect in 2008, the euphemistic Wall Street rhetoric has taken on a much more sombre tone as the illusion of infinite growth became apparent. In architecture however, the 'jargon of inauthenticity' has continued unabashed, seeming at best naive, at worst ideological. With gentrification, unemployment and urban deprivation hitting new record levels, the self-cannibalising core of contemporary capitalism has begun to show its teeth.

It is, therefore, hardly Parametricism's incessant form evolution, but rather capitalism's non-reproductive death-drive, that will change our cities forever; siphoning off every breath of productive life formerly invested into them. Rather than simply being complicit in this, architecture is thus called upon to actualise its potential for resistance. This necessitates doing away with autopoiesis. The task is instead to develop a true architecture of autonomy*.

*The term is borrowed from Pier Vittorio Aureli who, together with practitioners like Eyal Weizman and Marcus Miessen, has contextualised architecture as inseparable from politics. (*The Project of Autonomy*, PV Aureli, Princeton 2012).

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Note from the Editors:

Fulcrum sets itself the ambitious goal of both articulating and speculating about the monumental ideological flux transforming (particularly Occidental) society this decade.

With an attitude both imaginative and sceptical, it attempts to track the constant evolution of contemporary teleological narratives, with a view to better understanding the world in which we live. Accordingly, this article is a highly significant one, in that it furthers Fulcrum's agenda on the relationship of global finance to architecture. Perhaps controversially, we passionately believe that:

Buildings are the least interesting thing about architecture.

This is by no means to deprecate the value of architecture-as-high-art (with all its spatial and material beauty), but rather an attempt to elevate the significance of the political, technological and economic contexts in which architecture comes to being. Further, it permits a more objective position regarding the architect's relationship to their own profession.

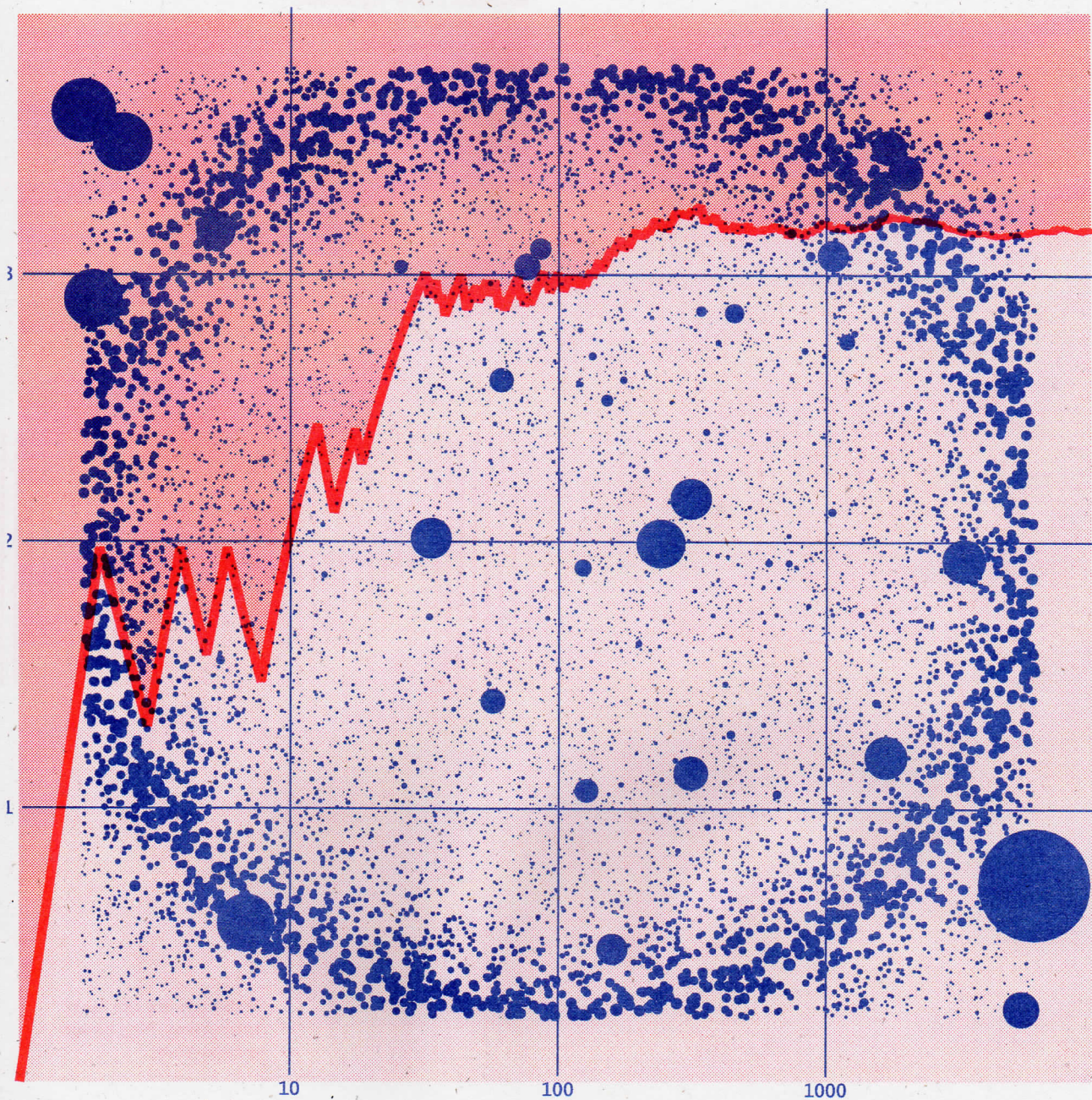


Illustration of the Monte Carlo method of finding Pi, by Tobias Jewson.

Named after the eponymous casino, Monte Carlo algorithms have made possible things as diverse as the hydrogen bomb and high-frequency trading. The Monte Carlo method is integral to automated trading, inter-market spreading and financial arbitrage. *Ed.*