

# Fulcrum

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## everything everywhere.

a.bava

Architects have a contractual obligation to optimism. Every line that is drawn, every nub that is scaled-1d, every polygon that is mirrored, contains the ultimate promise of some kind of improvement — and a surplus of beauty.

Architecture, like art, serves a social purpose in the way it contains, redirects, informs, moves forward (or sideways) whatever form the dominant economic power currently takes. This has become an unnerving and very apparent reality in architecture's current submissive relation to neoliberalism.

Certain contemporary art is managing to maintain its political relevance, even under the ridiculously corrupted mechanisms of the market that sustain it. This is achieved by over-identifying with the visual and ethical repertoire of the relevant forces that shape our lives. By focusing on the realities of finance, corporations, start-ups and the internet, artists try to narrate, document, make sense of, and ultimately make visible, these mechanisms; not necessarily to come up with alternatives, but to provide lucidity and promote agency. This approach has been defined, politically and aesthetically, as accelerationism.

Architects have not been able to follow the same path. This is partly because they have been instrumental in giving form to the powers that they are supposed to question, but also because architecture has shamed itself into marginal territories (narrative architecture). It has adopted — visually, technically, formally, even in how it organises itself as a discipline — the very dynamics that it must challenge if it wants to maintain a political agency. Even more culpably, it has not made this process of appropriation into a project.

**But architecture, unlike art, is supposed to have answers on how to make things better. That's why it has progressively succumbed to the logics of neoliberalism. It was just trying to survive...**

This is not, paradoxically, the century of buildings — even if there have never been so many buildings built, and with so few architects involved.

Against the proliferations of blind tributes to Mies and well-made architecture (touch this handle!), we should look to a certain genealogy of architects who, almost unnoticed, gave shape to the spatial dynamics of an entire world order. These are: Saarinen, Kevin Roche, Gabetti e Isola, Gordon Bunshaft at SOM. These are practices that maintained a level of criticality while being able to move things forward.

I am not justifying the political, or ethical content of these practices' work but their mode of operation. They shaped, under cover of the most functionalist arguments, the spaces where decisions that change the world are made. Almost single-handedly, they defined the operation of the elite, contemporary work relations in the workplace, and indeed the lives of vast masses of people — down to the most microscopic affective aspects of existence. You could also say they focused on big private commissions while the rest of architecture was focused on a notion of public that was made obsolete by the rise of neoliberalism. In any case "corporate architects" never abandoned the quest for beauty, which is, after all, architecture's core business.

To be effective and to gain political agency, we can't just passively accept the dynamics of neoliberalism and its effect on the discipline and the built environment. We must make visible, displace, and twist these dynamics. We must have a sense of optimism and earnestness, which translates into necessary strength. Can we stay away from pretty, and pursue utterly devastating beauty? Can we avoid referencing Lewerentz when designing corporate towers and bring some of the beauty you can find in a Goldman Sachs lobby into social housing?

The forces at play must be confused and reorganised; every new building technology must be accepted and brought to its maximum and simplest expression. Ultimately we strive for the collective good even when choosing the radius of a stair thread, and to make spaces that are enjoyable and readable, and, if we can, make a proposition on where we stand collectively, because architecture is never just the background of life.

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## ironic corporatism.

j.self

*It's this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilisation, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle etc. There is a whole series of forms of critical or activist art that are caught up in this police logic of the equivalence of the power of the market and the power of its denunciation.*

Jacques Rancière

Within the genre of art described above is a specific category that might be called the 'ironic corporate.' Broadly, this type of art seeks to raise agency in the subject through parody, and proposes activism founded in the subversion of established aesthetic tropes. Located at the boundary of 'post-internet' and the 'new-aesthetic' (terminology no less nebulous than it is paradigmatic), the ironic corporate plays on hyper-branding and the commercial merchandising of previously uncommodified aspects of our lives.

It is a kind of postmodern pastiche that reprises bleached teeth, primary-colour clad and ethnically nondescript smiling people. It is a smear on the friendly face of corporate human relations: that sublime tension between the personal touch and the standard service. It is art that takes up the clean, sterile world of stock photography and tries to exploit its uncanny smoothness. After all, the aesthetic of the watermark is not the symbol of copyright itself; what is owned is not the image *per se*, but the seamlessness of the corporate global order it represents.

Certain radical elements of the design world, like the Dutch graphic collective Metahaven, have successfully deployed irony to expose the veiled threat at the core of corporatism: that modern finance is ruthless, violent and inhuman (*Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?* Strelka Press, 2013). There have been no attempts as yet to reproduce this strategy in architecture — unless one interprets the glossy instagram finishes of the hyperrealist corporate renders as unintentional parodies. More probably, they are just the residue of acute power envy, and

a negation of the architect's sense of their own agonising impotence.

**This absence is not just because architects tend to be humourless and sincere; as a cultural critique of capitalism, ironic corporatism naturally lends itself to rapid exploitation by the very systems it seeks to resist.**

The architecture of Frank Gehry may actually be a joke, and Gehry may be a greater (con)ceptual artist than even Damien Hirst. By the same, an ambiguity about whether a work constitutes farce or tragedy leaves open the possibility that the imitation usurps the original, and irony can become truth. The danger of the current condition is simply that a leakage of the corporate aesthetic into the domestic, and vice versa, is breaking down the barrier between life and work — with the result that labour is leisure (see Fulcrum #68 *Work on the Self*). Contrast the sharp, high-modernist 'offices' by Saarinen, SOM or Mies with the playful, casual, 'workplaces' of Facebook or Google (which Pier Vittorio correctly identifies as descendants of the 'loft').

Practically the only category of corporations that seem to actively resist this hipsterfication are those of the financial sector, where sobriety and suits reign supreme. The financial corporation is the new Hobbesian monarch, and a true leviathan. There is a terrific tension between the abstraction of an entity that has no natural personhood and the cultivation of the corporation's distinct persona. The paradox of assuming both the unique and generic is mirrored in the contemporary capitalist subjects that the financial corporation seeks to dominate. As long as the WTC and Williamsburg remain aesthetically distinct there is hope. But when the Barclay's CEO has rad tats, works from home in a converted Shoreditch warehouse and takes their fixie to get flat whites, we are all fucked. To resist the total exploitation of the individual by neoliberalism, the architect must, ironically, insist that the most reified corporate aesthetic be applied to all commercial space. This is the only way to save the domestic.

Image: Metahaven, Karl Marx chess piece from Nomadic Chess, 2013.

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NOMADIC CHESS

