



CONVERGENCE VERSUS FRAGMENTATION

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Dissensus in an action-oriented discipline like architecture is only productive as a step towards consensus. "The Age of Dissensus" is over. "Project Mayhem" is yesterday's battle cry. The "wild and unexpected new directions", i.e. the freewheeling, unconstrained experimentation that Mark Foster Gage is calling for, was the appropriate spirit of the discipline when architecture was confronted with the crisis of modernism.

Thirty experimental years later the avant-garde has found a new, coherent direction, and is finally gearing up to deliver viable answers. Finally, the chance has arisen for architecture to leave its distinct mark on the world's physiognomy once more. The "new cohesion", the current, global convergence of creative forces that I have been calling Parametricism is a reality rather than a manifesto. Mark's creative work is - undeniably - a part of this convergence, irrespective of his pronouncements. The backlash against my attempt to offer an explicit label and definition for this global movement is often rooted in the instinctive repulsion of being categorized. But the avoidance of explicit commitments, to shy away from taking a principled position, is a sign of impotence.

Although the adoption of computationally advanced design tools and the related discussion of sophisticated design processes was a necessary stage in architecture's recent retooling and upgrading, and indeed remains an important component of architecture's internal expert discourse, I agree with Mark that contemporary architectural discourse has to go beyond describing & discussing

design processes. The discussion of the performative merits and advantages of Parametricism cannot be postponed any longer. The incubation period of Parametricism took a full decade. Going mainstream involves the burden of taking on the full range of performances contemporary best practice has to meet. My recent discussion of Parametricism recognizes and answers this necessity by emphasizing how the style's formal heuristic finds its complement in a specific functional heuristics. My discourse answers the question of the societal function of architecture in general, and then demonstrates how Parametricism represents contemporary best practice.

Instead of merely calling for "larger cultural claims" I am explicitly making such claims, well-founded, detailed claims: The societal function of urban & architectural design is the innovative ordering & framing of social communication. Architecture and urbanism provide an articulate system of settings that bring the participants of social interaction together in pre-structured communicative situations. Post-fordist network society is characterized by an increased diversity & complexity of communication scenarios. It is the latest/current stage of modern, functionally differentiated society. To remain productive within this society requires a new level of communicative intensity from every individual. Everybody's path must be continuously coordinated and updated within a complex network. The pertinent architectural expression of this is the field of simultaneity, i.e. urban spaces where a rich variety of communicative offerings are simultaneously presented. The visual field is layered in all directions: in front, above, below. This rich manifold is ordered according to gradients and laws

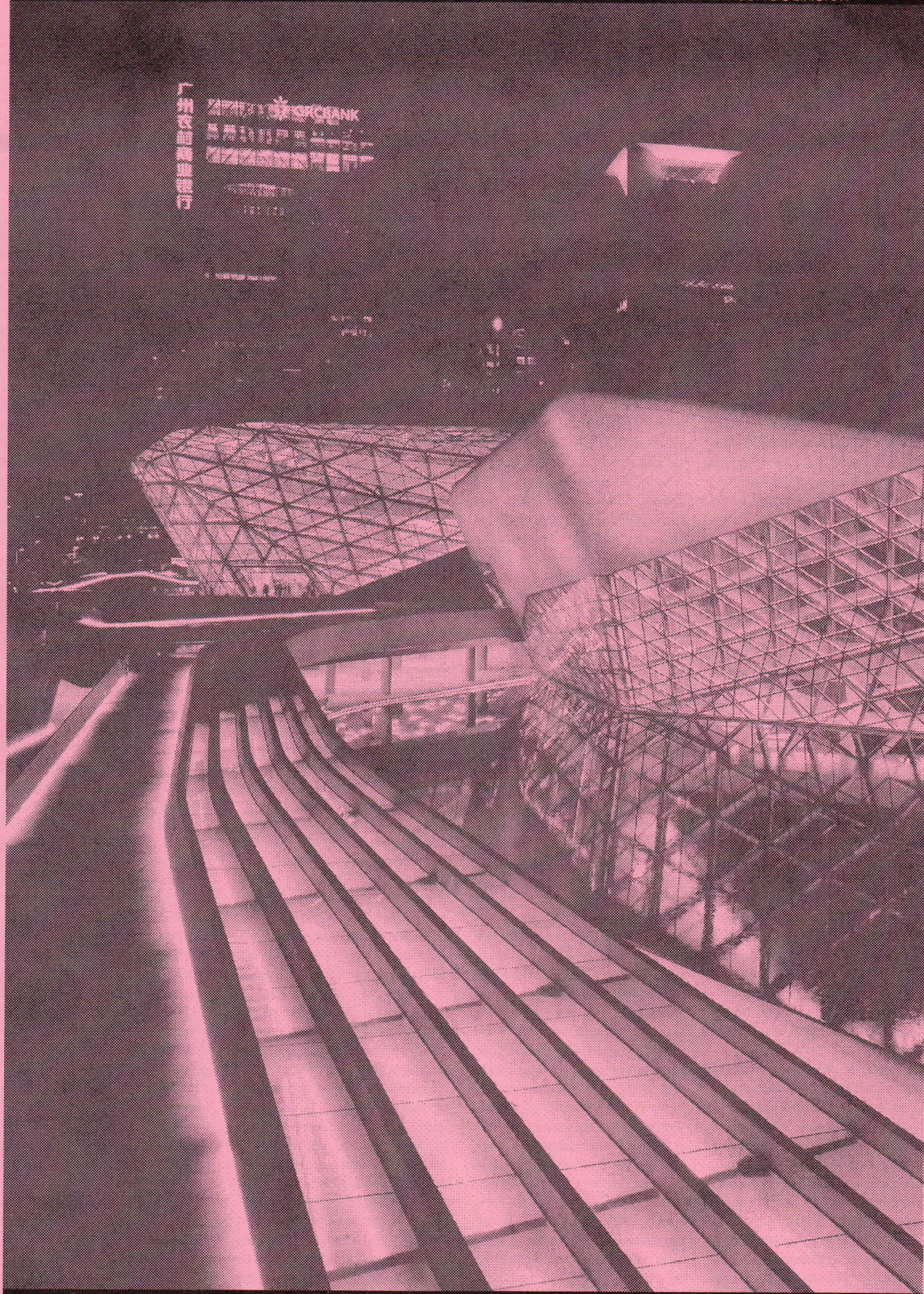
of correlation so that hidden layers can be inferred from visible layers. Navigation and orientation are key, as well as the atmospheric priming of social interaction. This poses three key aspects of architecture's task, the aspects of organisation, articulation and signification, together constituting architecture's core competency.

This leads us from modern space to parametric fields. These arguments have been elaborated in my book "The Autopoiesis of Architecture", especially in Volume 1, part 5 "The Societal Function of Architecture". The forthcoming second volume elaborates further on the key agendas for architecture's further upgrading. The "fragmented mosaic of mismatched agendas" must be overcome. In fact, the current global convergence of avant-garde design research (Parametricism) demonstrates the productivity of a collective research effort on the basis of a shared paradigm with shared principles and criteria of success. My writings try to build on the reality of this phenomenon by raising the stakes in terms of pushing Parametricism's avant-garde hegemony as prelude to its full mainstream performance and responsibility. The fact is that the autopoiesis of architecture - architecture as discourse, academic discipline & profession - has not stamped its imprint on the global built environment since the demise of Modernism. Thirty years of experimentation in the avant-garde segment of architecture has yet to produce results that decisively impact world civilization.

Architecture - just like science, or the economy - is a global, autopoietic function system of world society. As such our discourse stakes a claim for universal & exclusive competency for the totality of the global built environment, inclusive of the world of designed artefacts. (This excludes engineering infrastructures in as much as they are operating

underground or under the hood.) It includes the totality of the artificial visible world, i.e. everything that functions as interface or frame for social interaction/communication. Therefore we can speak of the function system of architecture/design, including urban design, architecture, interior design, furniture design, product design, graphic design & fashion design. Parametricism is architecture/design's answer to the challenges and opportunities of post-fordism, the only credible candidate to become the epochal style for contemporary world society. Parametricism articulates post-fordist network society by increasing the complexity and intensity of spatial & arte-factual communication. This implies that design always involves the intervention within systems of signification. All successful designers navigate these evolving systems of signification. However, there exists no explicit critical competency here. For me this spells one of the key agendas of contemporary design research: the elaboration of the competency to design urban & architectural projects as coherent systems of signification. For this purpose Volume 2 of the "Autopoiesis of Architecture" formulates a theoretical grounding for a new architectural semiology, and calls for the respective upgrading of Parametricism via a parametric semiology. So far this semiological project remains a solitary spearheading effort. However, this effort locates itself within the global convergence of Parametricism. The ambition to go mainstream does not stop the simultaneous advancement of avant-garde agendas - as long as they push into the same direction.

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Guangzhou Opera House, designed by Patrik Schumacher & Zaha Hadid Architects, 2011. Photograph by Iwan Baan.