DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

Against anarcho-capitalist architecture

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I have been asked by ARCH+ to write a rebuttal to Patrik Schumacher's widely disseminated claims for an "anarcho-capitalist architecture"—the latest iteration of his "parametricism" crusade. The risk of engaging with extreme right-wing discourses like this one is that they are so one-sided, polarizing, and in some ways, toxic, that they don't usually allow for the kind of measured and critical thinking that should accompany complex and nuanced discussions of the vitally important, indeed existential, questions they raise, namely: basic issues of justice, political life, and the distribution of resources in society that affect us all. A shouting match does not clarify such issues, it merely indexes the power of those who shout the loudest—giving an edge to the sensationalist, the bully, the sophist, the demagogue, and ultimately, the privileged. Impassioned public discourse requires a level playing field, and Mr. Schumacher's intellectual project, grounded in his de facto position as an active power player within the contemporary nexus of architecture and capital, would systematically demolish it. The stakes are high.

Let me first begin by outlining those aspects of Mr. Schumacher's position that I think ought to be welcomed in the discourse of architecture and public culture at large. At the broadest level, it is high time to reappraise architecture's role in society, not merely as an aesthetic or symbolic representation of the social but as a crucial site of production where political struggles are played out, actively constructing the categories of "architecture" and "society." This relation needs to be revisited in toto, from the politics of architecture as a profession all the way to the practices of designing, constructing, and running urban spaces, neighborhoods, cities, infrastructures, and territories.[1]

More precisely, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the need for establishing a discourse on architecture's construction of what we call "economic" matters. At its root, the issue revolves around the articulations between economics, politics, and architecture—with the latter as, perhaps, a crucial hinge that could undo the facile binary between the "normal" administration of things and processes of social change.[2] In this connection, Mr. Schumacher challenges us to address the question of what, exactly, do we understand "social change" to be, and how, exactly, does it come about? He forces us to face these questions, not simply of "change," but of change for what, by whom, where exactly, and managed in what way.

Finally, I agree with Mr. Schumacher's general dissatisfaction with the dominant modes of urban development and its attendant modes of regulation. However, I radically disagree with both his diagnosis and his prescriptions. Development is indeed over-regulated and over-prescribed, limiting possibilities for architecture and social flourishing at large. The problem, though, is that it is over-regulated to *support* capitalism at the expense of the majority of society. I would like it to be re-regulated with the help of architects as citizens; not, as he would have it, with architects as mere market-operators, which leaves the foundations of the problem intact. This means reinventing architecture by reengaging politics, not just attempting to actualize a nineteenth century free market ideology and its related discourse regarding the architect as a singular genius-entrepreneur.

Since his position entails, implicitly and explicitly, many complex consequences, I have organized my response around four main aspects: a historical argument; a political-economic, or democratic, argument; an ontological argument; and finally, an architectural argument.

I.
History

At the heart of the idea of an "anarcho-capitalist architecture" lies a romanticization of the medieval and early modern European city. In its crudest expression, this fantasy today takes the form of a return to feudalistic imaginaries of independent city-states powered by futuristic technology and where the traditional monarch has been replaced by "the Great Algorithm": capital. Hence, we see the emergence of alt-right discourses like "neoreaction," an ideology subscribed by the likes of Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel that seeks to undo democratic advances that started in the eighteenth century—the establishment of social, economic, civil, and political rights, variously institutionalized by different forms of democracy: parliamentary, bourgeois, constitutional (and hopefully one day, radical). Instead, neoreactionaries advocate the rule of private contract as the exclusive instrument for organizing social relations, and the complete dismantling of the state, whereby, as Mr. Schumacher defends, those cast aside by the market will fall into the hands of private charities and philanthropy.

As mentioned above, this vision rests on an idealized image of the medieval and early modern city—like those of the Hanseatic League, a quasi-confederation of Northern European trading cities—in which the relative freedoms gained from the sovereign by artisans, merchants, and small property-holders were able to spur a dynamic of functional differentiation in society between new classes, emerging professionals, and cities themselves.[3] The narrative of "free trade" underwriting this popular view, and later eulogized by Adam Smith, has today become not only an omnipresent ideology, but also the very operating system of the institutions governing global capitalism, from the European Union to the World Bank. Yet, it is striking how such a global system—now digitally encoded—still harkens back to medieval imaginaries of organic communities, merchant self-interest, archaic instruments of trade, and alchemical mysticism.

The importance of this imaginary to the current state of affairs cannot be overestimated. It serves as a legitimating myth for the most extreme forms of neoliberal ideology. The problem is not just that it presents a romantic version of the past, an arcadia of freedom, but that the way this is expressed reproduces some of the worst forms of historical violence the world has ever seen. It is no coincidence that much of the alt-right has seized on this imaginary, because it suggests a world that is resolutely white and Judeo-Christian—celebrating (or at least minimizing) the religious crusades of medieval Europe, the oppressive nature of feudalistic and early-capitalist social relations, and the plunder of colonial conquest and subjugation that underpinned European development throughout modernity.

Thus, while ostensibly what is being celebrated is merely the idea of a society of property-holders, all trading freely with each other, the history of how such a society was in fact built is effectively obscured and mystified. By the nineteenth century, as Karl Polanyi wrote in his seminal critique of unregulated capitalism:

"Trade had become linked with peace. In the past the organization of trade had been military and warlike; it was an adjunct of the pirate, the rover, the armed caravan, the hunter and trapper, the sword-bearing merchant, the armed burgesses of the towns, the adventurers and explorers, the planters and conquistadores, the manhunters and slave traders, the colonial armies of the chartered companies."[4]

According to Polanyi, it was not that trade created peace, but that rule-by-trade (in the form of an imperialist financial capitalism undergirded by the gold standard) demanded peace among European nations so that they could continue exploiting the rest of the world in a more orderly and systematic fashion. Indeed, right-wing ideologues like Carl Schmitt, shedding the proverbial fig leaf of liberalism, saw European colonial plunder as a necessary prerequisite to the accelerated power drive of Western modernization.[5]

A few critiques of Mr. Schumacher's position thus flow from the historical conditions implicit in his claims. At the most basic level, the history of "free market" capitalism is fraught with violence and dispossession. But even if we accepted that such violence was now in the past (which it is not), unfettered capitalism brings about its own set of problems. As Smith himself noted, competitive capitalism requires a state that will regulate markets, providing public goods like roads, ports, courts of justice, education and security so that trade can actually take place. As the world capitalist market expanded and

integrated, the birth of large corporations exacerbated the need for closer cooperation between states and markets. Joseph Schumpeter, no stranger to classical liberalism, also concluded that unfettered corporate capitalism tends toward centralization, which in turn requires bureaucratization and thus ultimately, more managed modes of political economy.[6] Failure to do so leads inexorably to massive systemic crises—of overproduction, lack of effective demand, and financial bubbles—as seen in the late nineteenth century, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the Great Recession of 2008, among many other periods of capitalist meltdown.

II.
Political Economy; or, The Meaning of Democracy

The historical argument around how capitalism began, and its historical specificity as a mode of production in which a minority controls the majority of the social surplus, is key to understanding the ethics implied by Mr. Schumacher's position, and of articulating a counter-project to it.[7] As we have seen, a key aspect of the anarcho-capitalist narrative is the naturalization of a society of property-holders, and the imaginary of a society "free" from political institutions that would regulate market processes—in effect, their total dissolution in favor of private contracts. However, the emergence of private property rests not only on contracts, but on coercion, exploitation, violence, and dispossession. Two main consequences flow from this. If the "unit" of measure of modern capitalism has historically been twinned with the nation-state as the largest concrete juridical-spatial form of organization—and, more recently, supra-national institutions like the European Union—Mr. Schumacher's emphasis on private contract would ultimately entail the dissolution of these *political* mechanisms for orchestrating trade and development. In the face of historical oppressions carried out by states, in principle this might not be a bad thing. However, while a universalistic theory of private contract would undo the sovereignty of the state, it also has the inverse effect upon the sovereignty of the individual—inflating it with an undue amount of agency and authority.

In classical liberalism, the relation between the market (as the site of private self-interest) and civil society (as the sphere of community engagement) was grounded in religious morality, the cultural mores and norms of patriarchy (organizing and reproducing the familial division of labor), and the social constructions of race associated with nation-state identitarianism. In the contemporary anarcho-capitalist ideology extolled by Mr. Schumacher, these cultural mod-

ulations become naturalized to such a degree—their historical roots and actual instantiations so obscured—that they appear not to be present anymore. As a result, the individual appears as entirely self-determined and self-realized, seeking their own further "optimization" as the main goal—what Mr. Schumacher refers to as "becoming superhuman"; an incredibly problematic terminology for multiple reasons, not least because the techno-utopian rhetoric, in its disregard for history, effectively smuggles in old liberalism's religious moralization, patriarchy, and racism.

This type of bloated hyper-individualism masks an intense authoritarianism. The self-realizing, self-determining individual, becomes the sole unit—the irreducible atom—of political sovereignty. As a consequence, the market's systematic production of winners and losers becomes a discursive truth machine for disclosing individuals' true nature (their ability to compete, to perform), obscuring the underlying socio-political conditions that determine the structure of the market in the first place. It then becomes tenable to sustain the dubious proposition that the poor and oppressed are wholly responsible for their poverty and oppression. Again, this view is only possible under a discourse that would completely disregard the historical processes that gave rise to, and continue to structure, capitalist society. In other words, the private contract is almost never a purely "free exchange" between fully self-realized and self-determined individuals. Individuals arrive at their positions historically, and history is underpinned by the oppression and exploitation of vast amounts of subjects that were violently kept from the possibility of self-determination: whether it is the domestic labor of women, the forced labor of slaves, the expropriated labor of workers, or the massacres and displacements of indigenous peoples. Pretending that this history doesn't continue to structure social relations today constitutes an illegitimate, performative claim to power.

A key aspect of the anarcho-capitalist narrative is the naturalization of a society of property-holders, and the imaginary of a society "free" from political institutions that would regulate market processes.

The reality is that all forms of society are based on social contracts that are not algorithmically derived by the sole economic calculus of self-governed individuals, but through very complex social, political, and cultural mediations. In other words, legitimacy must always rest on political deliberation, not merely market transactions. If democracy makes it harder to "optimize" certain parameters, like "productivity" in Mr. Schumacher's telling, the solution isn't to curtail democracy by subordinating populations to the rule of markets; it is to subordinate markets to the rule of democracy, effectively re-signifying the meaning of "productivity" and establishing a new distribution of the social surplus. Let's not forget that democracy means the rule of the *demos*; the rule of those without any special qualifications—by birth, wealth, skill, or status—to rule.

The anarcho-capitalist tale would have us believe that the market is a natural mechanism for sorting out those who should rule, and those who should obey. This is a coercive and deeply authoritarian vision, because the history of markets itself is fraught with violence. Furthermore, since "unfettered" capitalist markets entrench power by design—leading to massive structural inequalities, the creation of monopolies and other forms of political-economic domination (such as unfair trade agreements)—anarcho-capitalism is in direct tension with the principle of democracy.

Once a minority can control the political channels by which to secure their own position—in our age, the relative minority of property-holders in the form of financial and real estate assets—democracy is critically undermined. The ethical question of how those who are cast aside by the market are treated—being "rescued" by private charities, according to Mr. Schumacher—is one of moral imperative: in my view, it is immoral, and a philosophical mistake based on the long-debunked myths of methodological individualism, to simply write off those who do not "perform" under the highly questionable rule of the free market.

But is also a question of political economy at two other levels: one concerns the expediency of different ways of governing the social surplus; another concerns its aesthetic dimensions. On the former, Mr. Schumacher's claim that privatizing all land would lead to more dynamism and intensity of use is only tenable if we consider legitimate that only those with control of property will reap the surplus of investments that are, ultimately, produced collectively. In the case of Detroit, which he brings up (and where I live), the current wave of property speculation is built upon decades of investments that were both public and private. Furthermore, Detroit's "brand

value," which is a central dimension of the current commodification, was built by local people's cultural innovations: its music, arts, design, and even traditions of organized labor (such as with the enormous legacy of the unions or of legendary civil rights and anti-imperialist activists like Grace Lee and James Boggs). It is these people, disproportionately black and poor, who are now bearing the brunt of Detroit's bankruptcy, housing foreclosures, and water crises. In Mr. Schumacher's playbook, such populations should be displaced at any cost, to satisfy the needs of capitalists and entrepreneurial *innovators*; their collective assets—schools, neighborhoods, cultural traditions—seized and privatized. Only a very cynical or ignorant perspective could construe such a displacement and appropriation of public life as positive. The solution isn't to gift these spaces and cultures to private interests—it is to find ways to re-invent Detroit's industrial base in a way that fully enfranchises local communities. The solution is the opposite to that advocated by Mr. Schumacher: space should be collectively owned and managed—which does not necessarily mean bureaucratically managed by the state, but by political-economic forms of association that democratize decision-making, productivity, and distribute equitably the ensuing social surplus. Demagogues often claim that this implies a blind opposition to any "change" or mobility whatsoever. The key issue, however, is not opposing change, it is to radically transform what it means, and to radically democratize how it happens.[8]

Finally, the question of political economy involves an aesthetic dimension—it operationalizes particular *figurations* of the relation between the individual and the community. In Mr. Schumacher's position, as discussed above, the individual is construed as fully autonomous, self-realized and self-determined. His call for "everybody to be on the edge and charging forward" has distinct military connotations, evoking the technological sublime and glorification of war of the Italian Futurists, or the soaring rhetoric of other avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. However, while many of these movements modeled their visions on nurturing communities—such as the communal housing experiments of Red Vienna, for example—Mr. Schumacher's rhetoric suggests the neo-steampunk imaginaries of a war of all against all; future cities more like the dystopia of *Blade Runner*, a cacophony of barely controlled anarchic capitalism where massive monopoly corporations determine at will not only the distributions of roles and spaces in society, but the very nature of existence: a new ontological configuration synthesizing human and machine, fully determined by capital.

Response to Schumacher

III.
Ontology

This curious return to an old-fashioned futuristic imaginary, a techno-enhanced Hobbesianism, is in great part also derived from Mr. Schumacher's reliance on a very ontologically old-fashioned framework of methodological individualism. While the promise of hypermobility and the challenges of what it means to be (or not be) human should indeed be very contemporary concerns, Mr. Schumacher's discourse threatens to take us back to the dangerous fiction of the sovereign individual—smuggling in everything that historically comes with the undersides of humanism; capitalist male rule in its most heteronormative, patriarchal, and racist mold.

How would a society of private individuals deal with the fact that, as contemporary thinkers of ontology suggest, what we term human "individuality" is no more than a fiction of Enlightenment thought, propped up by the violent history of European colonialism? How can the sovereignty of the individual market transaction be coded into exchanges with animals, plants, or even microbes and minerals, which have now been shown to be clearly constitutive of the modern condition, but clearly do not partake of "human" individualism? At stake here is not only the necessary relinquishment of parochial models of rule by the market—which means rule by methodological individualism—but also the method of constructing much more critical and capacious forms of democracy that would account for the full complexity of the imbrications between human and non-human subjects.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the challenge of capitalist globalization is not merely between different scales of sovereignty—between, say, powerful cities and marginalized peripheries; or nation-states and supra-national institutions—but also an assault on the very survival of ecological systems. How then, can we expect private contracts and markets to adequately contain (exclusively on their own) the diversity of constituencies involved in producing the Anthropocene: humans, animal populations, seeds, waterways, etc.? At some point we're going to have to leave the provincialism of auto-poiesis and engage with the real difficulties of sym-poiesis—making-with rather than self-making—as Donna Haraway has written.[9]

Designing for such complex ontological constituencies requires an expanded cultural and critical literacy, not merely the calculations of the market, for it demands a capacity to translate across epistemologies and conditions of existential co-sustainability. The core algorithm of capital—"increase productivity" through cut-throat competition by and for human players—is too simplistic an approach for the enormity of the problem in a world where over-production, over-consumption, and extractive processes are leading the planet toward catastrophic global warming. Instead of addressing the practical and political challenges of how to engage ontological cross-constituencies, Mr. Schumacher places his faith in the unfettered market to single-handedly resolve this situation—a situation the unfettered market was instrumentally involved in bringing about to begin with. Does Mr. Schumacher really believe that climate change can be resolved without the tools of political institutions, broad cultural and social deliberation, and complex multi-organizational cooperation? Architecture has much to offer this toolkit, but in order to do so, it has to become much more intellectually and politically engaged; more ontologically curious, not less so.

IV.
Architecture

At the base of Mr. Schumacher's position lies a deep romanticism masking a deep fear of open-ended curiosity: that of architecture as a fully transparent social process that can be disclosed by self-mastered individuals, all freely transacting with each other via private contracts. This would be a fine vision, except that it is based on a flawed figuration of the human individual, erasing the 200-year-old history enfolded within it—from the dangerous mastery over nature, to the expropriation of large portions of the world, to an ideology of ever-expanding "progress" and aimless "growth," measured, tendentiously, as capital accumulation rather than the satisfaction of basic vital needs like health, housing, or culture.

It is immoral, and a philosophical mistake based on the long-debunked myths of methodological individualism, to simply write off those who do not "perform" under the highly questionable rule of the free market.

The city as public space provides other logics that cut across the market's supply-demand imperative. This unscripted and unpredictable quality is the richness of the city.

Bucolic romanticisms don't need to be dressed in neo-gothic (or neo-reactionary?) styles for them to be recognized as such—sometimes they emerge in the form of steampunk deliriums appropriating the rhetoric of socialist avant-gardes without paying their full price in terms of actually delivering broad-based social advancement. At the most literal level, the type of city advocated by Mr. Schumacher is one in which the logic of hyper-segmentation, compartmentalization, and social inequality coded within the very mechanism of the market (when artificially construed as "autonomous" from other social processes), becomes articulated spatially. This is the city we see today under the most extreme forms of "unfettered capitalism"—one of massive segregations, insecurity, and precariousness. Whether or not cities can be designed to accommodate more nurturing social relations—relations not of exploitation for profit, but of complex cultural literacy, translation, and exchange—depends on how the social surplus they naturally produce as a function of their accommodating different, intersecting, forms of life, can be articulated politically.

In other words, the city as public space provides other logics that cut across the market's supply-demand imperative. This unscripted and unpredictable quality—which can be purposefully designed through public modes of deliberation and design, through deliberate attempts to create spaces that cannot be totalized by any one actor or system, spaces that foster democratic enfranchisement—is the richness of the city. As Claude Lefort famously put it, in democracy, "the locus of power becomes *an empty place*"[10]—empty in the full-of-potentiality-and-possibility sense.

Understood architecturally, this raises the question of how the creativity required for designing and instituting such unruled spaces can be politicized and managed—what are its parameters, its subjects, its subjacent material conditions, and how can they be nurtured,

expanded, and democratized? Not so long ago, Jean-François Lyotard attempted to sketch out an answer to this question in a way that resisted both of the universalizing spirits of modernity: "systems" and "humanism."[11] His answer, to prize creative differentiations of the particular (what he termed "paralogy") was explicitly based upon rejecting the tyrannical logic of the market—in other words, directing resources toward culture, science, and other concrete endeavors of inquiry, and away from the instrumentalizing operations of capital, like the pervasive privatization of ever-larger spheres of the lifeworld. This doesn't mean rejecting the administrative forms of capitalist modernity—like corporations, contracts, or even markets—but understanding them as socio-technical assemblages that are not merely economic, but also political and architectural, and therefore, as collective instruments that may be redesigned to defend and empower democracy against capitalism.

1   As an example of an emerging organization seeking to do just this, see the work of The Architecture Lobby: www.architecture-lobby.org (accessed March 9, 2018).

2   This, in my view, is a core shortcoming of Jacques Rancière's political philosophy—a binary he reproduces in his dichotomy between "police" (the mere protection and administration of existing social roles) and "politics" (their effective opposition and re-distribution). See: Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

3   The early 20th century liberal historian Henri Pirenne supplies a popular template for this narrative.

4   Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944; Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 15.

5   Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (1950; New York: Telos Press, 2003).

6   Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942; New York: Harper Perennial, 1962).

7   See, for instance: Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2016).

8   In the context of Detroit, a number of coalitions of citizens, artists, and architects, have emerged to defend and give form to this project. See, for instance: www.detroitresists.org (accessed March 9, 2018).

9   Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

10   Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 17.

11   Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).