

ADHOCRACY

Joseph Grima – Editor-in-Chief, *Domus*, Milan

A few months ago, in April 21, 2012, the world's most influential financial weekly *The Economist* published a special issue announcing on its cover the advent of a third industrial revolution. One must assume this is not a statement to be taken lightly: the magazine, founded in the 1840s, was not much more than a decade old when the last such "revolution" began.

The world of those who make things is undergoing something of a shakeup, and its effects are clear for all to see. Knowledge about how to make things bounces freely from continent to continent; techniques evolve and hybridise at the speed of light. New, sophisticated machines empower individuals: if the last revolution was about making perfect objects – millions of them, all the same, to the exactingly consistent quality standards prescribed by the International Organisation for Standardisation – this one is about making just one, or a few. In the place of the factory there is a return to the workshop as a viable model of production and innovation. Instead of pursuing perfection, it embraces imperfection as the manifestation of individual identity.

But it goes deeper than a simple upheaval in the nature of the industrial apparatus through which industry operates. It would be reductive to describe the mutations around us as a "revolution" which is merely technological, although its origins might lie largely in new technologies. They hint at an epochal shifts in the balances of power around which society has for decades, if not centuries, been organised.

Making things is not usually considered a political activity. But in an age in which the geography of knowledge and information is almost seamless, it can become one. To make something – whether it is an immaterial interface or a very real city – is to interrogate oneself as to the definition of labour, the value of intellectual property, the ethics of consumption, and, for sure, the possibilities inherent in new productive processes. Design, more often than not, is the process of questioning, undermining, rethinking the expected responses to these queries.

The temptation is to perceive in this "revolution" as something new, sudden and unexpected. This exhibition argues that some of its aspects are deeply embedded in design history and in our culture itself. Some of these ideas we take for granted today, that we perceive as quintessentially contemporary, were in fact born long ago – ahead of their times, perhaps. Others we possibly haven't even caught up with yet.

Taking design as a stage upon which the theatre of life unfolds, the exhibition maps the forcelines that connect the various actors. These are some of them:

From a 21st-century perspective, our understanding of design is so deeply entangled with the notion of "authorship" that any attempt to consider one without the other would appear farcical if not blasphemous. Yet the little-acknowledged reality is that within the disciplines we today consider "design-based", the cardinal role of authorship – much as the idea of intellectual property itself – is a relatively recent one. In the introduction to his celebrated *Lives of the Painters*, Giorgio Vasari, the 16th-century architect and painter and Italy's first art historian (and, by extension "critic"; he is frequently credited with being the first to use the term Renaissance in print) marvels aghast at the utter obscurity surrounding the identity of the authors of Italy's great architectural masterpieces. In the introduction to the collected biographies, he writes:

There were built, then, [...] many edifices of importance both in Italy and abroad, whereof I have not been able to find the architects, such as the Abbey of Monreale in Sicily, the Piscopio of Naples, the Certosa of Pavia, the Duomo of Milan, S. Pietro and S. Petronio in Bologna, and many others which are seen throughout all Italy, built at incredible cost [...] I cannot but marvel at the rudeness and little desire for glory of the men of that age.¹

Vasari finds some meager comfort in the fact that in the centuries following this darkest era of utter creative anonymity, at least names of the architects –if little else– were being recorded. '[T]here began at last to arise men of a more exalted spirit', he wrote, such as

¹ Vasari, Giorgio: *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Project Gutenberg, 2008.

‘Buono, of whom I know neither the country nor the surname, for the reason that in making record of himself in some of his works he put nothing but simply his name’. Vasari devoted a significant portion of his life to single-handedly rectifying this state of affairs, recording for posterity detailed (if at times conjectural, since not all were alive) biographies of Italy's greatest architects, painters and sculptors.

Vasari's *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* gave birth to the genre of an encyclopedia of artistic biographies that is more than ever commonplace today. In 16th century Italy, though, the book must have appeared as anomalous – and arguably provocative – as Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects* did in 1960s New York. Rudofsky's exhibition, a celebration of vernacular and anonymous architecture at the MoMA, was presented as evidence that exquisite, “authorless,” architecture had existed for thousands of years – and that, despite not being designed by one person, it rivals individually designed works in beauty and, above all, practicality. As works of “criticism”, Rudofsky's exhibition is an interesting counterpoint to Vasari's book: one is a protest against collective amnesia around authorship; the other is an oblique denunciation of the 20th century's obsession with it. As Rudofsky writes in the introduction to the catalogue:

Part of our troubles results from the tendency to ascribe to architects – or, for that matter, all specialists—exceptional insight into the problem of living, when in truth, most of them are concerned with problems of business and prestige.²

By the mid-20th century, in other words, the pendulum set in motion by Vasari had swung so far in the opposite direction that the heroic persona of the architect has in itself become a product of design, an idea perfectly captured in the carefully-composed image of Le Corbusier's hand hovering almighty over a model of the Ville Radieuse. As much as it is a celebration of the vernacular, Rudofsky's exhibition is an indictment of a perceived betrayal of Modernism's primary preoccupations – social advancement and aesthetics – in favour of an

² Rudofsky, Bernard: *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, M Press, 1964.

all-consuming cult of personality.

In 1993, in the midst of a raging debate among economists and management as to how America's lethargic and massively hierarchical corporate behemoths such as General Motors and IBM could be rebooted, Robert H. Waterman Jr., a consultant with McKinsey on management practices, published a book titled *Adhocracy: The Power to Change*.³ Waterman argued that bureaucracy, the organisational structure whose precepts corporations, governments and large centralised institutions had come to treat as dogma over the previous century, was the single greatest impediment, in an era of rapid technological and social upheaval, to their ability to adapt and survive. He borrowed the term *Adhocracy* from the writer and futurist Alvin Toffler to describe "any form of organisation that cuts across normal bureaucratic lines to capture opportunities, solve problems, and get results".

Although Waterman's *Adhocracy* is a productivist manifesto inspired by the profoundly American cult of corporate efficiency, its defiance towards bureaucracy resonates with the sentiments of a post-war generation of architects and urbanists deeply critical of Modernism's top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to urban planning. It is the fundamental indifference to the reality on the ground, the inability or unwillingness to question the doctrine, that form the (somewhat unlikely) common ground between Waterman's critique of late-capitalist corporate culture and Team X's rebellion against, and subsequent schism from, CIAM; unwilling to accept the Faustian nature of its alliance with power and bureaucracy, they, and many others – from Cedric Price and his "Non-Plan Manifesto", to Yona Friedman with his *Ville Spatiale*, to Constant's *New Babylon* or the Situationists, or even Rudofsky himself – design a multitude of escape routes from the hegemony of bureaucratic power, of indifference and of regulation.

For many of Team X's constituent members, and for Giancarlo de Carlo in particular, the ultimate manifestation of Modernism's aloof detachment was to be found in its reliance on typological repetition. In his essay *Notes on the Uncontrollable Ascent of Typology/Type and Stereotype*, published in 1985 in Casabella, de Carlo speaks of the problem of the "architectural stereotype". Shifting in scale from the single apartment unit to the building, and from the building to the

³ Waterman, Robert H. Jr: *Adhocracy: The Power to Change*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.

neighbourhood, De Carlo detects in the act of "typological repetition" a paradigm of urbanism utterly unconcerned with identities of its inhabitants—to the point of becoming in itself "stereotypical".⁴ "Standard" residences, multiplied by the thousand form "standard" buildings, which are cloned to form "standard" neighbourhoods, and so on... These architectural "stereotypes" (a word which, as de Carlo points out, literally means "rigid form") are fixed, intractable to the point of making any sort of alternative or deviation seem entirely implausible. They are "passive-repressive", in that they allow no form of addition, variation or subtraction. Not only do they not permit the participation of their end-users, they are entirely indifferent to them, much as the bureaucrat is ultimately indifferent to the fate of the individual. None of this is accidental: for De Carlo there is an alignment between the interests of the market, driven by the impulse towards ever-expanding cycles of consumption, and the interests of bureaucracy, motivated by the perpetuation of its own power and hegemony. 'The impresarios of contemporary commercially-driven architecture', he writes, 'are the primary allies of bureaucracy, and bureaucracy offers them protection them by way of its edicts and ordinances.'⁵

What is at stake in the "design" of the power structures that regulate it is the possibility of reinforcing, extending and perpetuating power itself, a process which for Michel de Certeau occurs through the deployment of *strategy*. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he describes "strategy" as the calculus of force-relationships which become possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an "environment"; political, economic and scientific rationality, he claims, has been constructed on this strategic model.⁶ The bureaucrat, like the modernist city, is a product of strategy.

One of the earliest examples of open-ended design is Gerrit Rietveld's *Red and Blue Chair* of 1917. Its title is something of a misnomer, since the original chair was constructed of unstained beech wood and was not painted until the early 1920s: it was originally

⁴ De Carlo, Giancarlo: "Note sulla incontinente ascesa della tipologia/Type and Stereotype", *Casabella* 509-510, January-February 1985.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Certeau, Michel de: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press; Reprint edition, 2011.

intended to be painted by the user in his or her choice of colours, rather than in the red, blue, black and yellow livery of De Stijl. In 1963 John Habraken collaborated with Heineken to produce the woBo, or World Bottle: a beer bottle with a secondary use as a glass brick. In their seminal essay "Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom" published in 1969 in the leftist review *New Society*, Paul Barker, Reyner Banham, Peter Hall and Cedric Price advocated the provocative and controversial idea of abolishing all planning regulations in certain regions of the UK, allowing anyone to build anything anywhere.⁷

In all of these, the point is not that authorship no longer exists, or that it is without value – it has simply shifted in definition. There is a form of authorship in all of these projects, but the relationship between the author and the user is no longer structured around the logic of an inviolable sacrality of the author.

This is also another perspective from which the rise of indeterminacy's appeal in the heavily scripted environment of 20th century consumer society can be understood. In opposition to the "strategies" of states, corporations and organisations, De Certeau—quoting Clausewitz—identifies in "tactics" an "art of the weak":

I call tactics... a calculus which cannot count on a proper spatial or institutional localisation, nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalise on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with regard to circumstances. The "proper" is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing". Whatever it wins, it does not keep.⁸

⁷ Reyner Banham, Peter Hall, Cedric Price, Paul Barker: "Non-Plan : an experiment in freedom", *New Society*, 20 March 1969.

⁸ Ibid.

Indeterminacy is a fertile ground for tactical agency, as it is able to leverage those opportunities that can only be seized "on the wing", and that are therefore beyond the reach of formal, hegemonic power structures. A well-reported example of tactical behavior is the use of hand signals during Occupy Wall Street gatherings to circumvent a ban on amplified sound: since decisions were not made on the basis of voting but of consensus, the (leaderless) protesters were entirely reliant on this common, improvised language of hand signals to participate in the debate and, eventually, reach an agreement.

On 25 August 1991, Linus Torvalds, a Swedish programmer, posted the following words on the bulletin board news:comp.os.minix:

I'm doing a (free) operating system (just a hobby, won't be big and professional like gnu) for 386(486) AT clones.

This line is regarded as the moment in which Linux – the free, open-source operating system that today forms the basis the operating system upon which Android phones are based, the UNIX kernel which Mac OS X and iOS devices use, and the Apache software that powers most of the world's servers – was founded. As the tangible demonstration both of open source's ability to produce software robust enough to operate reliably within industrial environments, and of its ability to adapt seamlessly to free or commercially-driven applications alike, Linux became the poster-child of the almost limitless power of open protocols. Richard Sennett has defined Linux as a prototype of a new form of craftsmanship, "public craft", which introduces into the knowledge-based sphere certain logics and methodologies of craftsmanship.⁹ The hundreds of thousands of lines of code that make up Linux are also a cartography of the fluid and temporary alliances in which it originates, a testament to the heterogeneous entities, the millions of vibrant particles of diffuse networked intelligence and leagues of "charlatans and magicians", who assembled it, each with their own interests and finalities – a terrifying force of innovation and disruption. In other words, of the profoundly *tactical* nature of production, even in the corporate realm, within the information age.

So what happens when the contagious logic and culture of P2P collides with the structures of bureaucratic power? Governments and

⁹ Sennett, Richard, *The Craftsman*, Yale University Press; 1 edition (March 31, 2009).

economies, after all, have infrastructures of their own – "operating systems", so to speak – but their design is rarely questioned. But the question being raised is an important one: should the current configuration of structures of authority – money included – continue to be taken for granted? Are alternatives possible? As is often the case, times of crisis provide an impulse to ask such questions. In the small Greek town of Mavros, 800 people have signed up to a non-monetary "local currency system" called TEM, an acronym for 'Local Alternative Unit' in Greek, which allows goods and services to be exchanged among peers. The principles that underly the disruption already brought about by the open source movement in knowledge-based fields such as software, and that could be on the verge of transforming the hardware industry, are theoretically equally capable of revolutionising the core structures of society itself. Although it would be simplistic and reductive to ascribe them solely to the empowering effect of the network, the most obvious and striking demonstration of this is the wave of network-facilitated uprisings known as the Arab Spring: if tactics is about "making the worse argument seems the better", the Arab Spring is a demonstration of how what would conventionally be described as the worse argument – little equipment, no formal organization – can leverage information networks to seize the upper ground. In the west, meanwhile, networked "task-forces" (to borrow the military-corporate terminology of Waterman's *Adhocracy*), frequently operating under the flag of Anonymous, rapidly and unpredictably form and disband, presenting an unprecedented tactical challenge to the formalised structures of political and economic power.

Clausewitz's "art of the weak" – tactics – may in certain contexts be afforded the upper hand over the powerful but rigid strategies of bureaucratic authority by virtue of its almost limitless ingenuity and resourcefulness. When the New York Police Department barred journalists from accessing Wall Street during the Occupy protests in 2011 and 2012, members of Occupy, fearing the absence of the press would result in unrestrained police brutality, rigged a small drone controlled by an iPad with a high-definition video camera and launched it over the crowd. Just as the Predator enjoys invulnerability to attack from the ground thanks to its altitude, but can still attack, the Occucopter, as it was called, was invulnerable to teargas and police cordons yet could observe and record events on the ground—at a total cost of less than \$500.

Recognising that the future of conflict is urban, and that the battle for future supremacy is unfolding in full public view, authority itself is finding ways to subtly insinuate itself into the nerve-centers of tactical innovation. DARPA, the agency of the US Department of Defense responsible for the development of new technologies – an institution with a \$2.8bn annual budget that frequently (and largely erroneously) takes credit for having "invented the Internet" – has been particularly active in recent years in seeking to leverage the power of networked innovation for its own ends. A frequently cited example of successful "crowdsourcing" is the DARPA-funded XC2V program, which resulted in an advanced marine assault vehicle based on an input of more than 30,000 individual design contributions. In 2012, DARPA ventured squarely into the territory of bottom-up design innovation by embracing the "maker movement" and awarded funding to a program that will build Makerspaces 1,000 high schools across the US. In announcing the much-criticised alliance between the Department of Defense and O'Reilly Media (publisher of Make magazine, whose editor, Dale Dougherty, is the originator of Maker Faire), Martha Kanter, the Undersecretary of Education, noted that the nation's "strategic interest" is for all branches of government—including Defense—to "move from an engine of bureaucracy to an engine of innovation".

Adhocracy sets out to track down the traces of this "composite material" wherever they may be found. It attempts to resist taking a positivist stance, heralding the dawn of a new era in which design is destined to save us from the injustice and tyranny of authority, or from the latent remnants of Modernism's dogmatism, or from disease, famine and natural catastrophes. It does not argue that open, collaborative design practices will necessarily lead to a more just society or less poverty. It is not even an attempt to celebrate open design's remarkable achievements of recent years: these are well known, and plain for all to see.

Rather, it is an attempt to produce a snapshot of a broad cultural condition – a collective mindset, or attitude, that is seeping in through the cracks in everyday life, almost without us realising it. For this reason, it intentionally and frequently pushes beyond the boundary of the remarkably limited realm that (even within the discipline itself) is commonly acknowledged as "design". This cultural condition, which we define as *Adhocracy* but which could be defined in many other ways too, does not originate in the design community: it

unites individuals and corporations, armies and artists, designers and manufacturers, teenagers and philosophers. It definitely brings with it a new set of instruments, artifacts, customs and even a new aesthetic, but the most significant transformations have only just begun: the struggle to define new power structures, new economic frameworks, new forms of authority, new modalities of being political – an entirely new *social anatomy*, in other words – is unfolding in front of us at this very moment.

Adhocracy is an attempt to weave a critical thread through this rhizomatic multitude of ideas, objects and phenomena; it seeks to interrogate them, problematise them and interpret them. Its contents are largely sampled from everyday life, from the air we already breathe as citizens of the 21st century.