

Towards an Ethical Technique: Reframing Architecture’s “Critical Call Through Hannah Arendt

In his 1934 essay “The Author as Producer,” Walter Benjamin posited technique as the means by which art, as a mode of production, could come into a “correct relation” with politics according to Marxist critique, and obtain an “organizing function” to transform the social conditions of production, rather than reproduce them.¹ Through new techniques, the work of art could reveal the nature of reality as production, and induce others to become the producers of their own lives.²

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Although he did not speak of architecture, Benjamin’s valorization of technique correlated with the assumption of architecture’s “critical call” in the twentieth century that architecture was itself a mode of production, capable of producing new political possibilities through new constructive, organizational, programmatic and aesthetic techniques and technologies. Yet Benjamin also warned of art’s propensity to lose its transformational capacity through the mere formalism of technique, and to be subsumed within the economy of capitalist production and commodification only to “renew from within...the world as it is.”³ This appears to have been the trajectory of architecture’s “critical project” over the course of the twentieth century, as architecture itself became functionally and aesthetically indistinguishable from the technological apparatus of capital (“the apparatus”).⁴ In response to our contemporary condition of the apparatus, architecture’s “critical call” must be re-thought in ways outside of the instrumentality of technique in Benjamin and Marx, and the conception of architectural agency obtained through technology. It must be reframed in terms of a “technique” capable of addressing the nature of human, political reality, and human political possibilities, beyond how these have been envisioned by Marxist and other emancipatory social theories, or encompassed by the capitalist apparatus.

The political philosophy of Hannah Arendt can provide the terms for conceiving of technique in such a way, with respect to architecture, which speaks to politics as a matter of properly human action, whose meaning depends on a sense of reality that is constituted out of a plurality of human perspectives. In reframing architecture’s “critical call” through Arendt’s philosophy, I will first examine how the political ambition of architecture can be reframed within her theory of action as helping to fabricate the “common world” in which political action can take place, rather than achieving political ends through architecture itself. I will then discuss how architecture, as a discipline, can be understood to comprise an “ethical technique,” by which the fabricated world can be made “common,” thus allowing for the constitution of the common reality necessary for politics. I will then consider how, by virtue of this “ethical technique,” architecture’s “critical call” can be understood anew as envisioning the concrete forms and conditions by which an indeterminable politics of human action can emerge, alternative and resistant to the apparatus of capital.

TECHNIQUE AND POLITICS: MAKING THE WORLD COMMON

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt asserts the substance of politics as the realization of human freedom in spontaneous action and speech, rather than through the transformation of nature through productive labor in Marxist social theory.⁵ Action and speech require a durable, man-made “common world” to acknowledge, remember, and orient them, in which they can attain meaningful, public significance by being seen and heard. The durability of the common world gives a relative permanence to the otherwise fleeting nature of words and deeds, and so to the entire realm of human affairs itself. In posing a man-made, common world as an essential condition of politics, Arendt opens a way to reframe the relationship between technique and politics in architecture such that the very possibility of politics, rather than the realization of political ends, becomes a task for architectural making.

Arendt looks to the origin of the western political tradition in ancient Greece to obtain the key concepts for her trans-historical understanding of human politics. Her theory rests on the crucial distinction of political action from two other forms of human activity: the work of fabrication, which provides the common world of man-made things; and the productive labor that sustains natural human life, such as providing food and maintaining a household. Politics, for Arendt, is the exclusively domain of action: the actualization of human freedom in significant deeds and speech. As an end in itself, the purpose of action is to disclose one’s unique, human identity in relation to the highest human qualities and principles. Action and speech create a space in the public realm in which actors appear as “who” they truly are. Properly political action for Arendt is free from practical ends: it does not accomplish objectives, but rather sets off unpredictable actions and reactions by other actors that altogether comprise the web of human affairs. The essential condition of politics, according to Arendt, is the plurality and diversity of actors, each with their unique perspective. The sense of a common “political” reality obtains from the reconciliation of the plurality and diversity of perspectives, and allows action and speech to be meaningful.

Although the activity of fabrication for Arendt is not itself political, it provides for the possibility of politics by constructing the meaningful context for action and speech in the common world. Architecture and art have historically been the privileged modes of fabrication. Political freedom is a spatial construct for Arendt;⁶ politics is rooted in place, and must be bounded by walls, as in the agora of the Greek polis.⁷ A durable, common world of things is furthermore the pre-condition for the objectivity of the common, political reality deriving from the multiple perspectives born of human plurality. Arendt portrays the fundamental mediatory role of the common world with the figure of a table. By gathering individuals around itself as an object common to them all, in spite of their different perspectives of it, the table both separates and relates them, maintaining their equality and uniqueness.⁸ The fabricated common world thus anticipates, embodies and acknowledges the primary, politically constituted human reality necessary for action and speech to be meaningful. It is a condition of the political itself in that it must be fit for action; it must implicitly acknowledge the human ideals and principles that orient action and speech; and finally it must testify to, and memorialize action and speech to give them a relative permanence, by which they can provoke or inspire new action. The common world is thus the concrete and enduring milieu necessary for the actualization of human freedom, which Arendt saw as the essential purpose of the Greek polis.

TECHNIQUE AS POLITICS: “MAKING” POLITICS

According to Arendt, Plato initiated the modern conception of politics as a practice or technique for the realization of political ends. She argues that, in the Republic, Plato adopted fabrication as the primary mode of political action in order to remedy the inherent uncertainty and unpredictability of action. Fabrication was properly the mode of the craftsman; ruled by necessity, it could not be political, properly speaking, but insofar as it produced the

things of the common world, it was pre-political. The craftsman fabricated objects according to the instrumental logic of ends and means, implementing ideal models onto natural material through violence. Arendt charges Plato with acting analogously to the craftsman in conceiving his ideal city, in which he reconfigured human affairs according to an ideal model of the good. Politics for Plato became a means to a higher end: an art that operated on the substance of human affairs to give it proper shape, on the basis of theoretical knowledge. Arendt argues that this instrumental model of “making” politics provided the modern template for acting into and upon human affairs in the organization of nation states and their economies, as well as for revolutionary political theories seeking to re-make the order and substance of human affairs.

Arendt’s concern with politics in the mode of making is first and foremost that it precludes an authentic human politics of freedom. Subsumed within the instrumentality of fabrication and technique, free human agency for its own sake is denied, and the human, properly speaking, cannot be disclosed. In addition, no meaning or identity can emerge from the logic of ends and means governing fabrication: making is a means to an end, and determined by this end; it cannot itself address the “sake” for which the making occurs. Arendt argues that meaning cannot be made, but resides in the action itself; and the meaning of making is merely that of “making.” A further consequence of “making” politics is that the human sense of a common political reality is destroyed. The operative reality of the craftsman is the physical reality of the material world, which he knows through the solitary exercise of his technique. One perspective rules absolutely throughout the fabrication process, combining utility, economy, and effectiveness in achieving the desired end. Taking fabrication as a model for politics violently denies the human condition of plurality, as the reality that derives from it has no operative or productive value. Unable to recognize this primary human reality, politics in the mode of making destroys the substance of human affairs for Arendt by treating it as if it were mute, inert matter.

Following from Arendt, the political ambition of architecture can be properly understood as taking part in the fabrication of the common world: to fabricate the condition of the common itself, for the sake of a potential common reality in which politics can take place. Generally following Benjamin’s valorization of technique, “critical” modern architecture aspired rather to “make” politics: to realize the ends of a politics of human liberation and realization through technique in various “machines” for living and working, rather than establish the setting in which free action and speech could become meaningful. Arendt’s critique of making in politics holds for architecture, as much as it does for Benjamin and Marx. A politics of architectural technique can lead neither to human freedom nor attain meaning itself. Directed to achieve political ends by way of its very fabrication, the world cannot stand apart solely to acknowledge and orient action. Rather, it pretends to a properly human agency to condition action according to ideal schemas, however well intentioned, whose values, principles and outcomes are pre-determined. Furthermore, as a means to such ends, the world cannot recognize or accommodate human plurality: it can no longer be truly common, or the basis for establishing a common political reality.

A common, political reality is furthermore preempted by architecture’s identification of technique with technology, which is addressed to a techno-scientific understanding of reality. In so doing, architecture not only acts upon physical reality according to hypothetical schemas, but also upon the world of human affairs by adopting social, political and behavioral theory from the human sciences. Traditionally, architecture could always reconcile heterogeneous knowledges and “realities,” as constituent aspects of a unified cosmos, into a meaningful whole that could be known through both common sense and theory. However technique, as technology, attempts no such reconciliation: techno-scientific reality fundamentally denies the humanly constituted political reality conceived by Arendt. In acting exclusively through

technology, architecture reproduces scientific reality as de facto political reality: common, human reality thus effectively becomes a function of technique, rather than of common sense. In this way, architecture delivers human reality wholly over to the operative, technoscientific reality of the apparatus, in which the natural, technological, social and psychological are collapsed into a single sphere ruled by the logic of capital. In the obliteration of a commonly constituted reality, the very possibility of a public realm, and of a politics of human freedom in Arendt's terms, is precluded.

TOWARDS AN "ETHICAL" TECHNIQUE

In light of Arendt's critique of "making" politics, the political ambition of architecture can be reframed in terms of fabricating a world that is truly common. But the "commonness" of the world is no longer given: technique as technology cannot make common, but only reproduce the operative reality of the apparatus. To reclaim architecture's political ambition, fabrication must be reconceived in terms of a technique of "making common:" an ethical, rather than technical notion of technique, employed for the sake of constituting the common reality required for politics. There is precedent for such a notion of technique within the tradition of architecture as a discipline. Traditionally, the methods and knowledge of technique as constructive know-how were distinct from those by which architecture accommodated the socio-political world of human affairs. Technique fell within what David Leatherbarrow refers to as architecture's "technical reason," by which architecture engaged the reality of the physical world.⁹ Technical reason was guided by a correlative "ethical reason," alongside the self-reflexive "philosophical reason" of architectural theory, such that architecture could effectively situate and orient human life. Ethical reason, Leatherbarrow writes, was a practical reason, capable of grasping the "patterns" and "structure" of life situations in relation to the concrete practice of building.¹⁰ Accordingly, Leatherbarrow writes that architectural practice was, and remains, primarily a matter of "ethical understanding."¹¹ As such, it was by ethical, rather than technical reasoning, that architecture could exist as a discipline in its own right, and play a vital role in human culture.

Leatherbarrow's account of ethical reason aligns with Arendt's invocation of phronesis, the faculty of political wisdom in ancient Greece, by which the political actor could take account of greatest possible overview of different perspectives, motivations, potential courses of action, and arrive at a proper judgment of how to act.¹² Ethical reason also aligns with Arendt's conception of common sense as a practical reasoning, by which the multiple perspectives of individuals can be reconciled in a common, objective reality, by virtue of sharing a world. Architecture's ethical reason then can be understood as such a practical reason, and the capacity to spatially reconcile the perspectives of human plurality into a common reality through fabrication can be thought of as the particular "technique" of ethical reason—the technique of "making common"—alongside the technological methods of technical reason. Within this notion of an "ethical technique," architecture can in principle reconcile Arendt's notion of reality, constituted politically through common sense, with the opposing, operative reality of science and technology. In so doing, architecture can aspire to recognize and embody an authoritative reality that is truly common, in which the full plurality of perspectives is preserved.

As a disciplinary "subject" drawing upon the tradition of practical wisdom, architecture's ethical reasoning possessed a primary authority with respect to the form and substance of human affairs, and the nature of human reality.¹³ However, the authority of this ethical reasoning was challenged by modern science, which sought to describe physical and socio-political reality in the same terms, and as equally susceptible to technological operation. In adopting technoscientific reality and methods as its own, modern architecture renounced its traditional disciplinary knowledge and authority. Architecture's ethical capacities were subsumed within those of technique, which could not address the essentially "human"

dimension of socio-political reality. Furthermore, by generally allying its moral and political ambition with Marxist social theory, modern architecture renounced its own self-reflective, theoretical capacity as a discipline. The task of reframing architecture's "critical call" is therefore that of recalling its ethical and political vocation and authority as a discipline, at a moment when the primacy of technique as a political method, in spite of its futile history, remains a deeply felt conviction. This reframing can proceed only by recognizing the primacy of a human reality susceptible not to technological operation, but to an "ethical technique" proper to architecture as a discipline, capable of acknowledging a conception of human politics outside of the apparatus and the attendant theories of liberation resist it. Asserting the primacy of architecture's disciplinary knowledge and techniques in turn asserts the capacity of architecture to positively reshape the fundamental conditions of human life: to propose alternative visions of the world, rather than reproduce existing ones.

CHANGING THE WORLD

Arendt founds her political theory by reaching back to a world that is no more. In our late-modernity, the commonness of the world has dissolved into the inescapability of consumption. In the era of "junkspace," there is no question of recovering a durable, common world that could undergird a stable public realm for action. For Arendt, "worldlessness," the condition of not having a truly common world, is the hallmark of the modern age. What we now "have" in common is the technological apparatus of capital—joining the bio-political administration of natural life with the spectacular administration of desire—which effectively constitutes our political reality. Yet the notion of ethical technique suggests a way to reclaim architecture's critical, ethical vocation: not to resist, or somehow unmake, the apparatus from within, nor to liberate or change human beings, or human nature. Rather, the task is nothing less than to "change the world:" to fabricate the condition of the common itself, by which a potential, political reality born of human plurality and diversity can be spatially constituted. For Arendt, it is the world that is actually at stake in thinking about politics in the present condition, rather than the possibilities of action: "At the center of politics lies concern for the world, not for man."¹⁴ Men and women are always able to actualize their freedom by acting and speaking regardless of their circumstances; what is at stake is rather the condition of commonness in which human action can be meaningful, in the sight and presence of others. According to Arendt, one cannot change man, but one can change the constitution of the world, and "hope that the rest will take care of itself."¹⁵

If the substance of a new politics of action and speech is undeterminable for Arendt, yet still dependent on a common world, how can architecture address or anticipate this politics according to the notion of an "ethical technique?" How can architecture embody the recognition and acknowledgement of this potential politics, let alone give it orientation? Here, architecture must authorize itself as a discipline, and draw upon its latent philosophic and ethical reasonings to desire, envisage, and make judgments relative to human possibility. Architecture must take up the essentially modern task of envisioning the possibility of a politics that is radically alternative to that of the apparatus, while recognizing the potential of human realization in human action itself, for its own sake. According to Leatherbarrow, architectural design is inherently projective, anticipatory, imaginative, and desiring; its essential role has always been to project "real possibilities," rather than implement "possible realities."¹⁶ As a discipline, architecture is thus capable of "concretely" imagining new forms of commonness that would potentially engender a new politics of action. In so doing, architecture effectively assumes, if indirectly, a decided "criticality" with respect to the given reality of the apparatus. The possibility of politics then remains a task for architectural making, dependent on projective techniques of envisaging through fabrication; but the substance of a possible politics remains in the domain of human action for its own sake, and has yet to announce itself. This politics remains undeterminable by theory, let alone by architecture,

stemming as it would, according to Arendt, from the essential human freedom to initiate action. Yet architecture cannot envision the possibilities for politics alone: architecture's "critical call" is that of other disciplines as well. Architecture must participate in the collective imagination of a potential politics across all domains of culture.

The prospects for the imminent emergence of an alternative politics in Arendt's terms, whether spontaneous or prepared for in some way by architecture, are far from certain. Yet in reframing its so-called "critical call," architecture is enjoined to raise the very question of politics—human self-realization—in terms other than the apparatus, however tentatively or provisionally. Posing this question anew, on its own authoritative terms as a discipline, could be architecture's most important "critical" achievement. Within the apparatus, any eruption of Arendt's conception of human reality would be unsubsumable, as no common denominator would exist. The forms of such an eruption would emphasize commonness rather than durability, and the temporality of occasions, rather than the permanence of boundaries. Through its different modalities of exercising "ethical technique," architecture could aspire to a "durable" critical practice of fabrication. This practice would finally depend, as Leatherbarrow points out, on the self-reflexive philosophical reasoning of architectural theory to comprehend architecture in relation to other disciplines and cultural discourses.¹⁷ In so doing, architecture will be able to preserve itself as a "critical" discipline, and ultimately able to account for the commonness of the world that it constructs.

ENDNOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 2007), 223.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 230.
4. My use of the term "apparatus" is intended to connote the broad conception of the "apparatus of capital" in late-modernity, comprehending the primary aspects of Guy Debord's analysis of spectacle largely outlined in *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995); Michel Foucault's theory of power and discipline, particularly in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977); and Giorgio Agamben's theory of bio-politics in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), and "the apparatus" in "What is an Apparatus?," in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishick and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). The following paragraphs summarize Arendt's political philosophy as set out in this work.
6. Hannah Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 119.
7. Ibid., 170.
8. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.
9. David Leatherbarrow, "Architecture is its Own Discipline," in *The Discipline of Architecture*, ed. Andrzej Piotrowski and Julia W. Robinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 86, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10151240>.
10. Ibid., 86; 95.
11. Ibid., 84.
12. Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," 168.
13. Leatherbarrow, 84-5.
14. Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," 106.
15. Ibid.
16. Leatherbarrow, citing Dalibor Vesely, 102.
17. Leatherbarrow, 95.