A symposium held at the Architectural Association on 11 March, attended by Jeff Kipnis, Eric Owen Moss, Wolf Prix, Alejandro Zaera-Polo, Charles Jencks and others raised questions about the polemical theses proposed by Patrik Schumacher’s 450 page treatise on the Autopoiesis of Architecture. As the title suggests, the book proposes a unified, comprehensive theory of architecture as a self-organising system of communications within the framework of Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory. It observes architecture as a network of communications within a larger social system and links the two with a unified theory. It suggests that unless a new avant-garde style is proposed for the 21st century the discipline will face redundancy. Opening it up for debate, the event created ground for exploring the future trajectories for architecture as well as critical theory production.

The event was set up in a way in which each guest in turn joined Schumacher at the table to offer their critique of his theory and allow him to defend it. The words that surfaced frequently in the course of the ten-hour long discourse – style, autonomy, systematise, intuition, theory as well as suspicious, authoritarian and exclusive – divulge much about the arguments exchanged. In proposing architecture as an autonomous network that is perpetually avant-garde, functioning independently but as a cog in the social machine, Schumacher's arguments attracted more than a little scepticism.
theory delivering a 'code' or coherent 'style' appears out of place in the contemporary. Wolf Prix commented that 'while the content of the book appears new, the arguments are quite traditional'. Others like Mark Cousins outlined the dangers of trying to propose such a social theory and questioning whether it is really a job for an architect. Jeff Kipnis outlined the contradictions in the text, like architecture claiming an intuitive role in the age of the counterintuitive, and in its theory of communications that value external conversations over what he believed to be the more important internal ones within the discipline. Schumacher noted all the criticism with enthusiasm while remaining adamant that his thorough study, which led to the writing of the theory, justifies the logic behind it. He did not defend his somewhat traditional approach but seemed confident that the results would produce something new.

One of the main points of critique was with the somewhat controlling attitude proposed by the theory as it attempted to be avant-garde and the possible threats to pluralism. The risks of systematising and codifying processes through a complicated, formulaic lexicon were outlined by the invited speakers. The systematic categorisation in the book was found by Charles Jencks to be paradoxical given the traditional role of the avant-garde as that of eliminating them. Eric Owen Moss criticised the attempt at novelty by blaming such theories to be too prescriptive, almost as if it is saying 'Hey Kid, you want to be a radical? Do this, do this, do this!' He read out a paragraph from Japanese author Haruki Murakami describing the importance of 'sometimes getting macaroni when you put rice pudding mix in the microwave', outlining the importance of unpredictability in architecture. Wolf Prix chose music over heated debate playing Bob Dylan's Desolation Row in what one can only assume to be a plea for entropy. Zaha Hadid, Schumacher's long time professional partner, claimed that while she is in favour of the benefits of computation and replication facilitated by Parametricism, she disagrees that it is the ultimate stage in the discipline's development.

Theoretical interrogation aside, the book was also assessed as a 21st century publication by Brett Steele and Alejandro Zaera-Polo, and found to present a number of novelties as an architectural text. Zaera-Polo displayed the results of his 'parametric' analysis of the book showing the most frequently used words including 'theory' which came up 790 times! Steele noted that the book has roughly 18 images to its 200,000 words and is visibly dominated by numbers. It provides a one-page summary of the entire text at the back causing him to conclude that the best way to read it would probably be backwards. He found the book to be 'a different kind of architectural monograph that, whether it's right or wrong is a representation of the dominant mode of communication in the 21st century'.

The structure and purpose of the debate distinguished Patrik Schumacher, it's organiser, from his theory, which was consistently attacked for not leaving room for opposition. Throughout the discussion he maintained that his
attempt at a body of coherent arguments was a way to present his observations over time and not an attempt to dictate or prescribe and that he had hoped to create something as a basis for further research and debate. While there was an atmosphere of scepticism in the event, there were also those like Brett Steele who said that it didn't matter if he didn't understand everything in the book 'because Patrik does' but it remains to be seen if the larger readership beyond this circle of critics would be satisfied with as much.