Patrik Schumacher has the potential to be one of the most influential figures working in architecture today. As a partner at Zaha Hadid Architects he is at the very forefront of contemporary architecture, and as director of the Architectural Association Design Research Laboratory (AADRL) he is one of the most prominent pedagogues in the field. The Autopoiesis of Architecture (AoA) is the first volume of his attempt to provide a comprehensive theory of world architecture as he sees it.

Architects seem curiously drawn to theoretical reflection. From Vitruvius in antiquity, Alberti in the Renaissance, up to the manifestos of modernists such as Le Corbusier, and the more recent work of Peter Eisenman and others, architects have considered it vital to explain themselves in textual form. Schumacher explicitly claims lineage from these architect-theorists, and suggests that AoA is a “solution” to the puzzle of contemporary architecture.

Schumacher has certainly not built his theory from scratch, however. Over the last 30 years it has been fashionable for architects to borrow liberally from philosophical terminology in order to justify their own work. In AoA, Schumacher has attempted something far more exacting: applying the sprawling “social systems theory” of Niklas Luhmann to architecture. Luhmann, a German sociologist, explained that modern society could be understood by identifying its unique functions and their systems, such as politics, the economy, or science, each of which emerges spontaneously from the complexity of society, while simultaneously helping to maintain this complexity. The word autopoiesis (in Greek, “self-making”) is used to describe this process.

Schumacher asserts that architecture should be added to the list of functions, and AoA is mostly concerned with explicating the idea that the purpose of architecture is to “organise and articulate increasing social complexity”. It’s a dense text, with arguments derived from architecture, philosophy, sociology, corporate literature, computing and science, and as such needs to be engaged with on a rather rigorous level, perhaps beyond that which many architects have patience for.

AoA is at its most powerful when it analyses what makes architecture what it is, as opposed to art or science. The section on form and function is excellent, understanding it as a necessary binary logic that structures all architectural communications. Schumacher does well to relate new developments in architectural
media to historical periods, with some fascinating passages on the design process and the concept of the drawing. He is, of course, an acknowledged leader in the world of digital design and he theorises it convincingly in terms of its ability to add reversibility to the design process, thus vastly increasing the potential complexity of a design.

Where AoA begins to falter is when Schumacher attempts to explain what architects ought to be doing. He proposes a rehabilitation of the idea of "style", claiming that the extravagant architecture of Zaha Hadid is leading a new "epochal style" of architecture called "parametricism", which will take over from modernism as the dominant form of the 21st century. Schumacher claims that only parametricism can cope with the complexity of 21st-century spatial requirements, but then falls to give any convincing examples. Considering that social complexity exists in ever more physically intangible ways (such as the internet), and that parametric software is just as capable of making ordinary buildings cheaper as it is of making large, formally exuberant museums, these claims are left as metaphors.

Schumacher believes that radical architecture need only provide innovative spatial formations into which new social formations will miraculously form. As well as this, throughout the book "architecture" is vaguely defined, sometimes encompassing all the architects in the world, sometimes shrinking until it refers only to Hadid and the AADRL. These and other moves permit Schumacher to completely banish politics and ethics from his architectural horizon, leaving his theory remarkably conservative for someone so keen to be considered avant-garde and radical. The rather pompous attempt to claim hegemony for Schumacher's own personal interests, along with a pressing need for an edit, somewhat mar what is a genuinely accomplished attempt to provide a grand theory of architecture.


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