Architectural Body as Generative Utopia?

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The focus of this paper is not so much the functionality of Architectural Body as an architectural project as its meaning in the context of the history of ideas. Arakawa and Gins’s project to combat death and reverse destiny represents, to a certain extent, the demise of modernity pushed to its radical point. It redefines the human condition not as the product of something given and biologically programmed, but as a sheer product of reason, something that can be revised and reconfigured by human beings themselves. In this paper I argue that their project originates in a contextual predicament which strikes at the heart of contemporary interrogations as to the agenda of modernity, and as such constitutes a critical reassessment of modernity, its demise and its limitations.

Keywords: Architectural manifesto; Utopia; Modernity; Strategies of empowerment.

To the rationally-minded critic, the work of Arakawa and Gins may at first glance seem utopian. Their architectural project is not only aimed at designing new types of buildings but encompasses a much broader scope. Arakawa and Gins undertake the challenge which consists not only in providing room for the living and designing new types of buildings, but in turning the living into undying beings, beings against death. Imagining and working towards life without an end is not only a hubristic undertaking, it also shakes the foundations of our conception of man, a being towards death, determined by his own awareness of death (Heidegger\(^1\)). But this project also situates Architectural Body in the realm of utopia, in a locus beyond what seems possible, in other words—u-topos.

Needless to say, there is a good dose of fiction and aesthetic license in this undertaking, which leaves the rationally-minded critics that most of us are faced with the following dilemma: to dismiss the project as the product of two optimistic minds or to try and make sense of it? If one chooses to undertake the challenging task of making

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\(^1\) In Being and Time, Heidegger defines man as a “being against death,” a being who is aware of the fact that he is bound to die (Part II, chapter 1, sections 45-33).
sense of it, one soon realizes that there is more to it than meets the eye, and that *Architectural Body* is also an architectural manifesto that situates itself in relation to an architectural tradition which it seeks to assess, and possibly to improve on.

Besides, when one compares Arakawa and Gins’s project to other utopias imagined in the 20th century, or rather to architectural projects which come close to abstraction, one may wonder if *Architectural Body* does not demonstrate more awareness of reality. Critics like Richard Sennett have remarked on the way modern architectural projects make a point of going against nature. In *The Conscience of the Eyes*, he tries to account for the predominance of straight lines and sharp angles in the concept of the grid, and argues that they can be read as a constant reminder of the prominence of the rational over the natural, as if by building such an environment we could hope to “channel” nature, but also human beings, and master their less rational and more bestial tendencies, their drives and passions, and celebrate the triumph of modernity. Sennett also explains that the grid, which has been used extensively in twentieth century urban planning (a city of streets intersecting under right angles) was the fullest and most fitting expression of the dream of the city as uniform, impersonal, cool and neutral. The idea was to fight historical contingency.

The grid can be understood as a weapon to be used against environmental character—beginning with the character of geography. In cities like Chicago the grids were laid over irregular terrain …. The natural features that could be levelled and drained, were; the insurmountable obstacles that nature put against the grid, the irregular course of rivers or lakes, were ignored by these frontier city planners, as if what could not be harnessed to this mechanical, tyrannical geometry did not exist. The farms and hamlets dotting nineteenth century Manhattan were expected to be engulfed rather than incorporated as the grid on paper became building in fact. (52)

The concept of the grid therefore rests on the idea that nature can/should be curbed, that an ideal world is one in which man’s drives and urges—in other words what makes him what he is—should be channelled and repressed so as to let the rational side triumph over the bodily. *Architectural Body* rests on a radically different postulate which can be summed up as follows: architecture should adapt to man and not man to architecture, so that we may wonder whether it is the grid or the architectural body that is the real utopia.