

Theory and tribulations of the free section

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«We must immediately warn the reader that we have no intention of reviewing recent architectural trends. Instead, we would like to focus attention on a set of particularly important attitudes, asking ourselves which role criticism must take».

Manfredo Tafuri

Criticism poses an old problem — Ito argued.

He had majored in social sciences, and was now writing about the spatial manifestations of economic models.

While a Marxist background provided him with a clear scope on historical and dialectical materialism, he was now focusing on how the concrete world, from the planning of cities to the materialization of buildings, was shaped by an ideology that fuelled different forms of speculation.

Criticism was charged with ideology too — he concluded.

To write about a built building is like writing about a film, a work of art, a book: an (often futile) exercise on projecting desires, ambitions and frustrations on somebody else's work.

Can words offer a transcendental insight into designing a building? — He scribbled down on in his notepad.

Can text complement the experience of inhabiting architecture, offer new light, reveal its secrets?

He paused for a while, puzzled about the possibility of generating a neutral point of view in a highly ideological world.

Ito thought that critique was always late and therefore retroactive. Instead, he had been developing writings in a new form of theory.

«Colonization through financial systems are achieved with the implementation of concrete manifestations. For every abstract force, there's an equivalent material structure», were the first lines he had written.

Entitled *Models of Capital: A concrete theory for spatial organizations of a materialist systemic organization*, his paper intended to prove how contemporary architecture was a modification of an old order that responded to an underlying set of economic parameters.

In the form of a Hegelian dialectic, his theory was divided in three points:

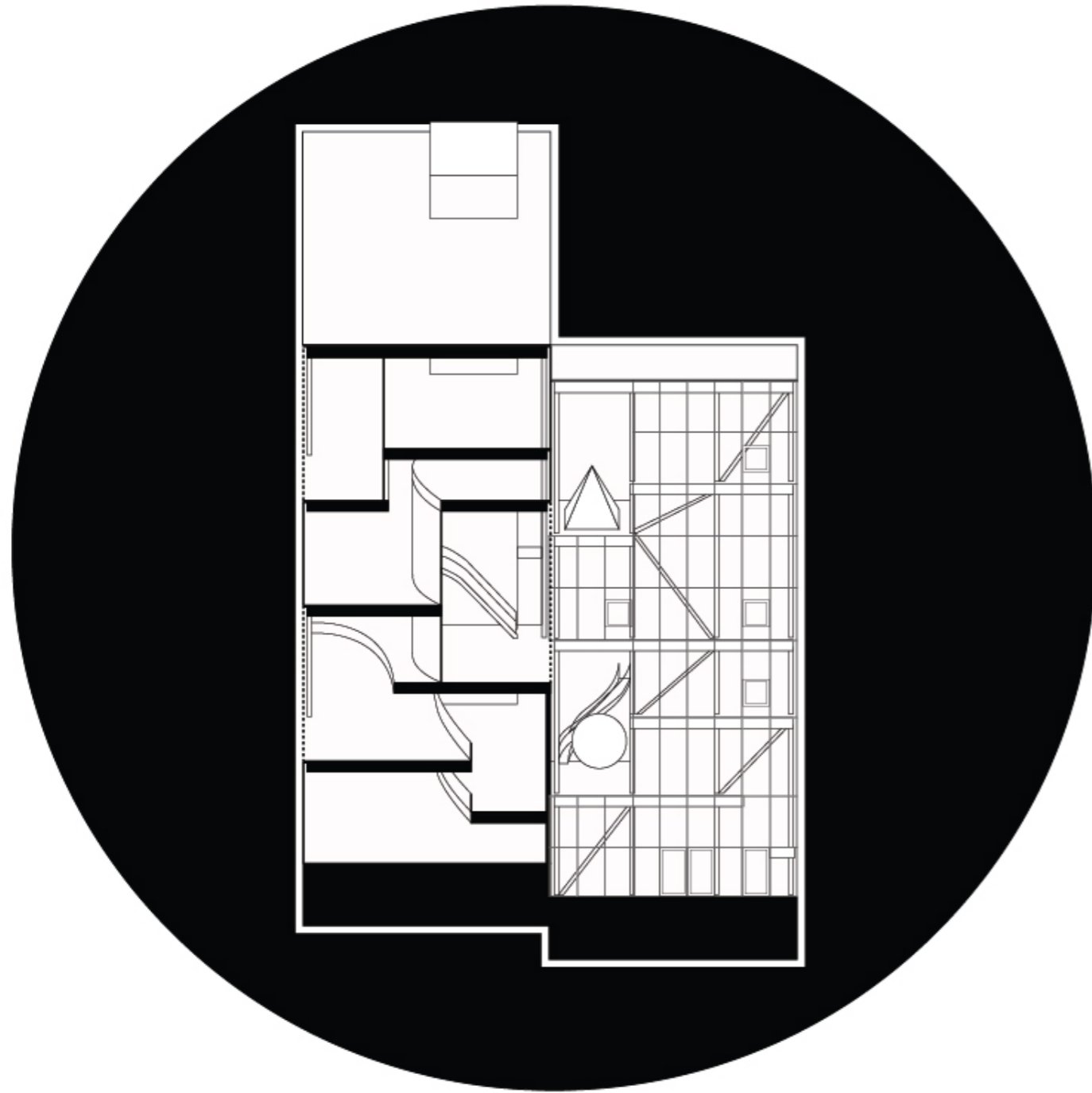
1. A thesis that stated that modernism was architecture submitted to its last radical transformation; a shift that occurred by the incorporation of modern technologies and an economic system that translated into an ontology of elements, systems and points
2. An antithesis that argued that the legacy of modernism can be found in the heritage of the Le Corbusian five points; although also in the glass skyscrapers of the corporate aesthetics championed by Mies.
3. And a synthesis that concluded that, with no major significant technological (since we are still building with concrete, steel and glass) and economic changes (capitalism can adapt to any drastic changes), contemporary architecture (like contemporary art) can only work within the framework of modernism and its materialist heritage.

He had decided to visit Shibaura House for the reason that, according to him, although the building displayed an approach clearly guided by the legacy of modernism (free plan, free composition of the façade, garden roof), the architecture seemed to respond to it with twists and turns, as in rewriting its script to answer the call of a transformed capitalist plot that was swiftly adapting to contemporary lifestyle.

After entering the lobby of the building, he began his journey through volumes of varying heights, moving effortlessly between indoors and outdoors, crossing interior courtyards and observing how, throughout the diverse plethora of spaces, a series of events were unfolding simultaneously: a meeting in a smaller transparent room, a group of children climbing up a stair, a couple of people discussing a publication over some tea, somebody eating in the kitchen, another group gathering behind some curtains on another chamber, etc.

For him, the Shibaura House was, in a way, a modernist epitome, while simultaneously suggested a slight deviation from its fundamental dogma. On one side it was flexible, universal, stripped out of ornament, and seemed to respond to its ontological principles. On the other, it displayed a spatial condition that was absent from the original modernist script. He noted how out of everything highlighted in the five points (the pilotis, the free façade, the horizontal window, the garden roof and the free plan), no element could foresee the evolution of capitalism from a manufacture and production-based system, to the fluctuating abstraction of speculation like the unannounced 'free section' did.

«The free plan, opening up space for the collectivization of production, lost its ground as the economy focused on interconnectivity, and attempted to create an image of inclusion, and flexibility. The free section was to architecture what *Airbnb* and *Uber* were to hospitality and transportation, an opportunist system, aiming to capitalize on the idea of personal freedom and on the possibilities of a self-proclaimed inexhaustible versatility» — he excitedly concluded in his paper.



Contented with the stream of thoughts that had hit him, Ito glanced one last time at his notepad and closed it. After prematurely guessing that it would have been just a “simple walk” through the promenade of the Shibaura House, he had reinforced his theory after “discovering” a building testifying through its malleable space, that it was not only part of modernism’s latent heritage, but a socio-economic aberration shaping the essence of contemporary architecture.

Felling victorious after proving his theoretical triad, Ito stared into the multidirectional void one last time convinced that this new found sectional freedom was not really a break from the horizontal plan of capitalism, but the advancement into a more complex juxtaposition of networks with flows that would be as malleable as unpredictable, maximising through irregularity the capacity to capitalize on the dynamic states of the cognitariat.

As he headed back into the street, he stared straight ahead, convinced that his theory was not a form of ideological criticism, but a radical form of architectural theory.

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Of course, more than a fundamental difference, this condition offers a slight variation from the essential dogma of modernism. In architecture the free section presents an alternative to break away from the dictatorship of the monolithic block, a structure made out of repetitive floor slabs responding to an economic system of open plans and abstract hangars for mass-production.