

The Exceptional Reichstag. On the Relationships between Late Capital, its Imaginary and Architecture

*El Exceptional Reichstag. Sobre la relación entre
“tardo-capitalismo”, su imaginario y la arquitectura*

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Breve biografía

Giacomo Pala is a Research Associate in the Institute of Urban Design at the University of Innsbruck, as well as a doctoral candidate studying under the guidance of Peter Trummer. His interest lies in the areas of theory. More specifically, he is conducting a research about the concepts of crisis and modernity in relation to Architecture, using as a departure point Piranesi's Campo Marzio. He has taken part to different research programs at the Architecture Department of Genoa's University, giving lectures on Representation, History and Theory of Contemporary Architecture. He is a collaborator in a research about parametric representation at the Department of Architecture of Genoa's University. He has worked for Coop Himmelb(l)au in 2011-12. He has published papers and participated to international conferences. He won the DiaStízein Prize in 2014 thanks to which he is publishing a book about the relations between architectural theory and popular culture. In 2012, he co-founded Burrasca, an independent cultural association for which he co-edits the homonym magazine.

Resumen

En este artículo se intenta discutir el tema de la excepción como una categoría conceptual en relación con la sociedad contemporánea y su paradigma económico-cultural: el tardo-capitalismo. En primer lugar, se estudia la relación entre la arquitectura, el poder y la economía con el fin de encontrar lo que puede considerarse como excepcional en la actualidad. En consecuencia, se observa que la excepción es hoy en día uno de los elementos

clave para la episteme contemporánea hasta el punto de convertirse en una nueva normalidad. Desde este punto de partida, se ve que cualquier expresión arquitectónica –como la definición de “icon building” de Charles Jencks– que intentó definir la idea de excepción, ha fallado, convirtiéndose en normalidad. En consecuencia, a través del estudio del Reichstag de Berlín, se desenmascara una característica estética que podría considerarse como una excepción excepcional incluso hoy en día. De hecho, aunque en una historia compleja y complicada, en las formas de este edificio se puede reconocer una excepción estética (la estética de la diferencia) que incorpora la multiplicidad y, en vez de exprimir valores absolutos, utiliza la tensión entre los valores para producir algo de excepcional todavía hoy.

Palabras clave

Imaginario, tardo capitalismo, genérico, negativo, contradicción.

Abstract

In this paper, an attempt is made to discuss the topic of the exception as a conceptual category in relation to contemporary society and its economic-cultural paradigm: late capitalism. It is first studied the relationship between architecture, power and economy in order to find what can be considered as exceptional today. Consequently, it is noted that the exception is today one of the key elements for the contemporary episteme so much so to become a new normal. Given this assumption, it is noticed that every architectural expression –such as Charles Jencks' definition of the “icon building”– that has tried to define the idea of an exception has ultimately failed, becoming a norm. Therefore, by studying the case of the Berlin's Reichstag, it is unveiled an aesthetic property that could be considered as an exceptional exception even today. Indeed, even though its complex and troubled history, in this building's historical features can be found a kind of aesthetic exception (the aesthetic of difference) that embodies multiplicity and, rather than express absolute values, uses the tension between values in order to produce something different even today.

Keywords

Imaginary, late capitalism, generic, negative, contradiction.

1. Architecture and power: capital, the generic and the exception

The issue of the exceptional exception is, today, a particularly interesting topic for a very simple (as well as difficult) reason that is related to our cultural and social imaginary. Indeed, a discussion of such a concept in its actuality has to start with one fundamental question: is it still possible to have exceptions in the late capitalist imaginary? In other words, when our society is asking for newer and newer “stuff” on a daily basis, has not the “exception” become the new normal? In order to try to give an answer this question, it is necessary to deal with a larger discussion about the relationship between architecture with both the political and economic powers, as well as their representations and their imaginary.

Indeed, when discussing this issue, it is not uncommon to hear expressions such as “architecture has always been and always will be a manifestation of power”. Even though this formula has become a cliché because it does not consider the possibility of breaking the connections of architecture with power, it is partially true in admitting the inextricable relationship between architecture and authority: in fact, since the power –whether it is public or private– commits vast amounts of money in building plans, architecture cannot be considered just as the activity of the architect. Rather, it is one of the core activities of the political and economic authorities. Michelangelo and Bernini had to work for the pope (and at the same time used the occasion given to them by him) to realize their ideas giving to the Catholic Church some of the most iconic symbols and wonderful buildings in architecture’s history. 20th century architects Albert Speer, Marcello Piacentini and Boris Iofan contributed in the formal definition of Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism, helping the transformation of theoretical ideologies in terrible realities and, more recently, architects like Daniel Libeskind or Jean Nouvel build in the rich societies and emerging economies of China and United Arab Emirates, in the social and political conditions of late capitalism. A paradigm that is so well rooted in the ideological structures of our culture that even today (a moment of crisis for the western side of the world’s economies) architects can work in China or India because, since you need money to build buildings,

the most valid political theory is still “*ubi pecunia, ibi patria*”¹.

The main characteristics of this social and economic paradigm are the run-up to the continual growth of economic production and consumption, the reduction of all the forms of inefficiency and the need of increasing profit. Since late capitalism’s cultural dimension is characterized by a massive expansion of the space of culture to the point of invading the space of consumerism in which the consumer lives in a state of absolute enjoyment for the products, every cultural discipline –among which architecture– can be extremely productive and useful for the development of the neo-liberalist cultural imaginary. Late capitalism then, as Slavoj Žižek writes, can only be comprehended today by understanding that “while capitalism is resolutely ‘materialistic’ (what ultimately matters is wealth, real power, pleasures, all other things are just ‘noble lies’, chimerae covering up this hard truth), this cynical wisdom [late capitalism] itself has to rely on a vast network of belief: the whole capitalist system functions only insofar as one plays the game and ‘believes’ in money, takes it seriously, and practices a fundamental trust in others who are also supposed to participate in the game.” (Žižek 2009, 304)

Late capitalism can be seen then as the evolution of capitalism. Referring once again to Žižek’s words, this “capitalism 2.0” is based on the belief in consumption, in communication and, ultimately, in an ideology that is embodied in the “spectacle”. It is also possible to see the differences between Capitalism and late Capitalism from an architectural point of view. In this sense, it is easy to see how classic capitalism is embodied in New York. Indeed, New York is a city that has used all of the possibilities given by new technological advances, such as the power engine or the elevator for the formalization of modernity through the construction of higher and higher skyscrapers. Nonetheless, the model for capitalism has been shifting since the 80’s. According to Jacques Attali, if it is true that the classical paradigm of capitalism –exceptionally described by Rem Koolhaas in *Delirious New*

1. Latin locution often quoted as a Karl Marx’s aphorism meaning “where is the money, there is the homeland”.

York (1978)– can be explained using the “big apple” as its paradigmatic urban reality, the late-modern trend of capitalism can be described studying Los Angeles².



Fig. 1. New York City photographed on the 19th of January 1932.

Conforming to Attali's ideas, Los Angeles can be defined as the city of nomadism and immateriality. In other words, LA is the city of the “economics of creativity” that transform technical innovations in products for the mass-market. Los Angeles is the city where inventors and actors from the creative industries live, and it is the city where the historically new enterprises have enabled the industrialization of the commercial goods opening up for the so-called “industrialization of services”. Moreover, it must be remembered that two of the recent most revolutionary technologies have been invented in the Los Angeles area: the mobile telephone and the Internet. These

2. See Jacques Attali, *Une brève histoire de l'avenir*, (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2006).

two media dematerialize the city, its infrastructure, and our material lives providing to all of us a de-territorialized personal address. As far as the discourse about the relationship between architecture, power and economy is concerned, Los Angeles shows how the real power is shifting more and more from the political side to the economic one, becoming dematerialized. In this sense, Los Angeles is a particularly interesting city to study, because it is the place where architecture has learned how to relate itself with the expression of the capitalist society's power: the market and its aesthetic dimension, the “spectacle”. Furthermore, in this city, it is easy to spot the double dimension of the architectural embodiment of the late capitalist values. On the one hand, there are singular architectures (such as Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert hall or its recently added neighbour, Diller & Scofidio + Renfro's “Broad Museum”) that are the main characters in the urban spectacle where glass, colours, lights and shapes embody power, glory, entertainment, memory and identity. On the other hand, the city of



Fig. 2. Judge Harry Pregerson Interchange, Los Angeles.

Los Angeles is a land of anonymous and generic buildings that seem to formalize the dematerialization of our lives. In this sense, Los Angeles can be described as the paradigm of our social global ecology where people live in data, study and work in decentralized places, sleep in rooms and live on the highway. Lastly, if according to Reyner Banham are the Freeway and the beaches, the places “where the Angeleno is most himself, most integrally identified with his great city” (Banham 1971, 221), nowadays, we have to add to the list the Internet and the media.

Interestingly enough, Los Angeles can nowadays be considered as an historical example of the late capitalist city: it can be seen as the prototype for the infamous megalopolises growing all over the world. The cities are urban realities conceived as a vast field of generic architecture sometimes interrupted by literally spectacular buildings. Of course, this truly late capitalist city is an almost infinite array of the generic, interrupted only at times by moments of urban entertainment in the contemporary urban spectacle. These moments – these exceptions – are monuments that, rather than interrupting the commercial aspect of the late capitalist city, embody an economic power of the same kind, contributing to the social imaginary of capital.

Looking at this reality, it might be interesting not to refer just to the cities, but to these “exceptional” architectures too, in the attempt of understanding how the objects that constitute the city help shaping the cultural imaginary. In fact, if these spectacular buildings – these global icons – are moment of exceptions in their urban context, it is necessary to look at them from a disciplinary point of view. Looking at OMA’s CCTV, or at any building built in these global cities by the “star-architects”, it seems like that the exception have become the new normal. A condition typical of the Episteme such as the one we live in: a cultural paradigm that ultimately digests everything asking for constant innovation. Finally, it is then necessary to add a question to the initial one: what can really be an exception (an innovation) today?

2. A paradigmatic example: Berlin’s Reichstag

In order to deepen a historicized understanding of today, we can consider the European metropolis as more fruitful examples because of the layering of history that characterize them. For instance, if we consider a city like Berlin, we easily see the traces of the different stages of western modern urban capitalist culture. This city is particularly interesting because, even though it is not as nomadic as Los Angeles, it has transformed its history, which has often been tragic, in a touristic value. In-fact, the tourists – the ultimate nomads of today – go to this city in order to visit places like the “Jewish Museum” built by Daniel Libeskind, the various Jewish Memorials, the Nazi bunkers, the wall’s fragments, and many other historically relevant buildings. Among these buildings, we can look at the Berlin’s Reichstag as a case study in order to try a theoretical speculation in the attempt of answering to the above-mentioned question.

This building is particularly interesting because it is one of the most meaningful examples of architecture which symbolic status is related to all the ideological hopes, tragedies and political changes of 20th and 21st centuries’ western culture.

We can start to look at the Reichstag’s symbolic importance in history, starting from a precise day: the 9th of November 1918. This day, Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed the institution of Weimar’s republic from the Reichstag’s balcony. With this event, the words “Dem Deutschen Volke”, added on the building’s facade in 1916 with the Kaiser’s discontent, became finally real. We can consider this event as the first symbolic features of the Reichstag. In fact, this building designed by Paul Wallot and completed by Philipp Holzmann in 1894, became, since then, the symbol of the political power and struggle of Germany.

The symbolic status of the Reichstag became even more relevant when, after the failure of Weimar’s republic, the building was famously burnt on the 27th of February 1933 by the Nazi in order to repress the communists, the socialists and all of the oppositions. Even though Nazi’s responsibility



Fig. 3. Reichstag building during the constitution celebration, 11 August 1932.

it is not completely proven (although more than likely so), the Reichstag surely became the symbol of Nazi's rise to power³. This tragic act has in-fact to be understood, in this context, for its symbolic status: the destruction of a building was used as the symbol of democracy's failure and of Nazism's superiority with respect to the presumed decadence of values implicit in the democratic government. Furthermore, it is not by chance that the Nazi used this building for propaganda. Finally, at the end of the Second World War, there would have been an ironic turn of fate for the symbolic status of the Reichstag in relation to Nazism. In-fact, if Hitler's party used the building in order to humiliate their oppositions, the Russians, once they conquered Berlin in 1945, used this building as a symbol of the end of the war and the defeat of the Nazi-Fascism in Europe through the –actually posed– Yevgeny Khaldei's famous pictures of a soviet soldier planting the red flag on the building's roof.

3. See Benjamin Carter Hett, *Burning the Reichstag: An Investigation into the Third Reich's Enduring Mystery*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).



Fig. 4. Reichstag Fire, 1933.

Fig. 5. Soviet print representing the conquer of the Reichstag (printed in 1989).

Interestingly enough, during the cold war, the building was essentially a ruin. It was on the border between the capitalist Germany on the west side of the Berlin's wall and the communist one on the east side of it, and it stood as the metaphor of Germany's loss of political autonomy. Even though, it was rebuilt in the 60's by Paul Baumgarten, the Reichstag was only occasionally used for one-off events and few exhibitions. Interestingly enough, One of the few (and probably the most famous) events that involved the use of this building was Christo & Jeanne-Claude's installation by the title "Wrapped Reichstag", realized for the first time in the 70's and redone in 1995. The two French artists wrapped the Reichstag with polypropylene fabric, aluminium and 15 km of rope in the attempt of generating a kind of urban estrangement (Christo & Jeanne-Claude 1995). As far as this essay's topic is concerned, this artwork can easily be read as the attempt to give back to the building its symbolic status by renegotiating its image with the viewer and giving to it a new aesthetic meaning: the wrapping of the Reichstag was the symbol of Germany's final loss of political autonomy.



Fig. 6. Christo's & Jeanne-Claude's team wrapping the Reichstag.

At last, after the fall of the Berlin's wall, the building became the most powerfully symbolic building of Berlin. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the Bundestag voted to move the capital city of the reunified Germany from the city of Bonn (the former capital of the Federal Republic of Germany) to Berlin. This change finally ended in 1999 when the last seat of the government was moved to the new capital. Indeed, this political shift is well represented by the Reichstag's restoration, when, in 1999, Norman Foster won the competition for the reconstruction of this building. In his project –that was actually very different from the first competition entry– the most suggestive architectural element is a new glass dome on the Reichstag's roof that is referring to the original dome of the building built by Holzmann, in which tourists and visitors are allowed to see the parliament and enjoy a wonderful view on the city⁴. Given the particularly troubled history of the building, Norman Foster's intervention is usually

4. After the refusal of his first design idea of an enormous canopy over the building, Norman Foster designed a Glass dome flooding the main hall of the parliament with natural light from where tourists can enjoy a 360-degree view on the city. Some have argued that he stole the idea from Santiago Calatrava's entry to the same competition, Calatrava included.

understood as a metaphor for “transparency”, as if the new glass dome, allowing the visitors to see the Bundestag's works, was a guarantee of democratic transparency by itself. However, it is possible to give another kind of interpretation to this intervention, thanks to which it is possible to give back a radically different political meaning of it. In a sense, this exceptional intervention can be understood as the representation of the economic power of late capitalism. Indeed, everybody who goes there, knows that, since the Reichstag is one of the most visited monuments of Berlin, will have to wait a few hours in queue before of being able to get in the building.

Why?

Because the Reichstag has today become an object of entertainment in Berlin's urban spectacle. Consequently, the Reichstag's new dome can be seen as the metaphor of the political power that pays its tribute to the economic needs of our system, allowing paying tourists to visit its democratic temple, rather than being a pure structure for democracy.

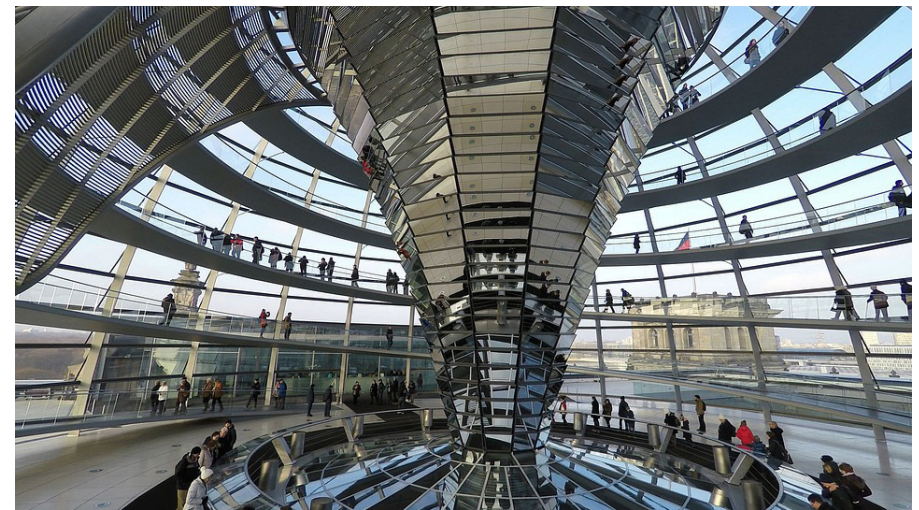


Fig. 7. Reichstag's dome, by Norman Foster. © Peter Dost.

Of course, the Reichstag is one of the existing clearest and more obvious symbols of the relationship between power and architecture because, as already written by Georges Bataille, it is quite obvious “that monuments inspire socially acceptable behaviour, and often a very real fear” (Bataille 1997, 19), being the representation of power. In other words, since this building was born as the parliament house of Germany, it is inherently related to the representation of power, whether it is political or economic. Still, this example is useful in relation to the question of the “exception”. The exceptional new dome –an exception from what is considered to be a generic dome– shows how the idea of “exception” has by itself become a norm.

3. The Formal metaphor of Authority: the normative status of the Exception

An obvious consequence of late capitalist imaginary: it is not sufficient for a building to have an exceptional shape –as the Reichstag’s dome– in order to really be exceptional, because being exceptional has become a normative value. Consequently, we cannot think a formal exception as a real cultural one, at least for no more than a bunch of months. Even if we look at the historical avant-garde, it is easy to see how even modern architecture has become the expression of an ideal conception of society in which men’s and women’s subjectivities were inner workings of a linear system. In-fact, as widely discussed by Manfredo Tafuri, the *avant-garde* itself would have become an instrument for the same *status quo* they were fighting against (Tafuri 1973). An example: the inventions of the Bauhaus that would have been copied by the non-exceptional IKEA. If that is true for architectural projects that had a real utopian cultural agenda, it is even more obvious today, when there is not any real avant-garde. Charles Jencks has defined this condition as the paradigm in which it has emerged a new architectural typology: the “iconic building”. Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Rem Koolhaas’ CCTV in Beijing, Enric Miralles’ Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, Zaha Hadid’s Heydar Aliyev Center in Baku, as well as Norman Foster’s Reichstag, are all –above many others– examples of this

new typology. According to Jencks, this typology is successful thanks to the use of metaphors and thanks to media attention, meaning that it is a proper “zeitgeisty” expression of late capitalism: culture has become spectacle, money has become dream, architecture has become entertainment (Jencks 2005). Interestingly enough, these buildings, in order to be successful, have to be “exceptional”, meaning that they have to be different and, referring to a famous advertising of an even more known company, architects have to “think different”. Nonetheless, in the definition of such a typological idea, it lies a contradiction: when everything is exceptional and nothing is normal, the exception becomes the mainstream and the design process needed to produce it, is transformed in a brainwashed design methodology. To overcome this problem, many architects nowadays seem to be interested in the comeback to a “normality” that is, given the present cultural context, the definition of a new exception. The basic assumption is simple as it is rhetorically effective: when everybody is weird, only the normal ones can be considered as “exceptional”. Consequently, the work of architects like Kersten Geers, Valerio Olgiati or Max Dudler (as well as many others), seems to suggest the possibility of developing such a cultural agenda. Nonetheless, thesis of this paper is that this approach to the problem is just a partial solution. In fact, their approach can be considered as the other face of the same coin of “iconism” or, referring to philosophy, it is an antithesis in a dialectical system that, at the end, participate in the definition of a shared synthesis. To cut it short, this is an architecture that is based on such an “absolute” idea of beauty that, using Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s words, would end up to produce a tedious “*campagna rasa*” (*tabula rasa*) (Piranesi 1993, 257).

4. An architecture of exception(s)

If this is the case (very briefly exposed), how is it possible to solve today’s contradiction underlying the concept of the “exception”?

It is possible to imagine an answer to this final question going back once again to the history of the Reichstag. In the very synthetic history of the

Reichstag given before it is possible to find a particular moment of this building's life that might highlight some possibilities to make a case for an exceptional architecture. Indeed, it would be a huge mistake to consider this building just as an example of architecture's ability to represent power. Thus, we can find in the building's history an aesthetic element designed by Wallot that was able to symbolically trouble the *status quo*. This aesthetic element –which was only approved during the Weimar Republican government– attracted the critics and the disapproval of both the Kaiser and the one of the capitalist power, which during Baumgarten's reconstruction of the building, planned to remove it.

The building was not able to satisfy power's idealistic and narcissist aesthetics because of its eclecticism (typical of the "Wilhelmine period") that mixed Neoclassical, Baroque and Renaissance stylistic quotations (the elements that will be taken off the building by Baumgarten in 1964) in the building's facade with *avant-garde* structures (as the building's dome) made in glass and iron (Rizzoli 2009, 183, 198). When it was built, the Reichstag was the expression of a different kind of exception: partly extravagant (the multiplicity of styles), partly ordinary (the formal principles); partly historical (the use of a dome recalling a long tradition of architecture's history), partly *avant-garde* (the use of new materials).

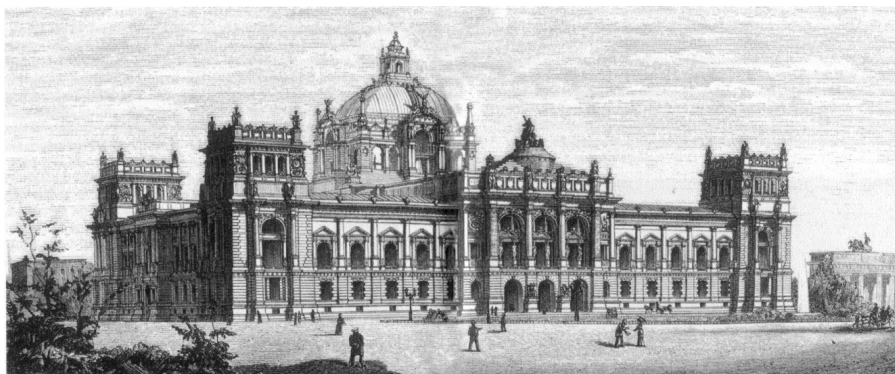


Fig. 8. Paul Wallot's perspective of the Reichstag, 1894.

Even though this particular feature of the building might look as a trivial matter, the consequences of this multiplicity can highlight some possibilities for the definition of the exception in times like ours, characterized by an almost eternal fight between the exception that becomes the norm and the norm that becomes the exception. The exception, in the paradigm of late capitalism, might be determined through a constant *détournement*, through a tension between values, rather than through the affirmation of one solid dogma (whether it is an absolute or a metaphor).

The Reichstag shows the possibility of an architectural exception in using different narratives simultaneously and in the tension between different values. In other words, the only possibility of having exception(s), today, might not be achieved by working for the realization of a new "absolute", but by constantly renegotiating the mainstream with the new. This kind of aesthetic, that might be appealed to as the "aesthetic of crisis", is constituted - as such - in the rejection of the positive language, using language's contradictions and contrasts as a positive value. Historical examples of this approach might be found in the work of Paul Wallot, as well as in the one of many architects of the past such as Jean-Jacques Lequeu, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Robert Adam, or Charles Rennie Mackintosh. In this sense, the contradictory status of this aesthetics produces a continuous displacement of values and carries out unexpected features of architectural language. Moreover, the idea of exception can be related to what can be referred to as a post-humanist/Dadaist idea: the interest in incorporating the "otherness" in one-/it-self. A kind of incorporation that adds meaning to the building and that changes the meaning of language's standards as they are normally understood.

This way of thinking architecture might open unexpected paths for the discipline and, in order not to be understood as a mere eclecticism or a kitsch formalism, the idea of incorporating the aesthetic of the "other" and the multiplicity of meanings, it is necessary to introduce a new critical category by which it would be possible to read Reichstag's first shapes as a meaningful and different approach to architectural design. In-fact, this kind

of architecture needs what could be called as a “critical ontology”⁵ (Kaipyil 2002). We need to move from an ontologically strictly defined architecture that refers to an abstract truth, to a different idea of architecture that is determined by an ontology that is constantly criticizing itself. Wallot’s Reichstag might represent the idea of a project incorporating different interpretations of the same concept, without solving contrasts and the problematic coexistence of differences. It invokes the need of an architecture that, through a parodic formalism, produces an exception in regards to the imaginary of both the exception and the normal.

This kind of architecture might then be able to take advantage of the gap between the relationship of architecture with power and its disciplinary aspirations, representing what could be called today as an exception. While newest styles and formalisms try to promote a contemporary exception through the production of extravaganzas, when they are really only the result of spectacle, and while the ordinary architectural expressions do not produce any exception being the product of an alternative but equally rhetoric imaginary, this kind of multiplicity allows architecture of being more than just one thing.

Then, the mix of languages proper of this multiplicity, that is epitomized in the original project for the Reichstag, loses its status of newness without being nostalgic, becoming something different from, and critical of, the usual conception of architectural discipline. The original Reichstag ultimately shows us that the mainstream and the “new” have to balance each other in a condition of acute tension.

The only problem of such a critical meta-project is, in our system, how long could it last? But to answer this question it is needed the development of a whole different story.

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5. The term “critical ontology” is a philosophical concept that finds its roots in Immanuel Kant’s philosophy and that is widely used by Michel Foucault.