The Politics of the Envelope
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(2008)
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The Politics of the Envelope

I Politics
II Envelope
III Faciality
IV Affects
V Dimension

Alejandro Zaera-Polo // The Politics of the Envelope
I. Politics

194: Paper architecture, for example, has lost its effectiveness as a political vehicle...

194: A unilateral politics of resistance is no longer able to challenge contemporary forms of consolidated power.

194: ...Architecture is as much a physical construct as it is a social or political one...

195: It may be good to stop speaking of power in general, or the state, capital, globalization, empire in general, and instead address specific ecologies of power...
II. Envelope

195: The envelope has the capacity to represent the ancient political role that articulates the relationships between humans and nonhumans in a common world.

196: ...Faciality is sustained because certain arrangements of power need to have a face. Facialization organizes systems of binary opposition... power structures configure private and public, inside and outside... As a homeostatic membrane, [the envelope] is a crucial component of the organization of power regimes in the building.

197: A discipline of the building envelope capable of remaining attached to reality and yet resistant to consolidation will enable architecture to produce effects that may actually destabilize power regimes rather than function as their mere representation, whether of the status quo or its resisting parties.
III. Faciality

198: The building envelope has become the last precinct of architectural power.

198: How does one construct the face of the faceless?

199: The current proliferation of alternative political practices, such as trends, movements, and other affect-driven political forms, runs parallel to the development of envelopes that resist primitive models of faciality, that are no longer structured on the oppositions between front and back, private and public, or roof and wall.

1 ...Contemporary politics are progressively less reliant on representation and proposition and more dependent on production of affects.
2 ...Proposed by Deleuze to address the theorization of systems of expression or representation.
201. Notable examples of a tendency toward a multidirectional, differential faciality, which resists coding, orientation, and other traditional forms of facialization, to engage in the production of new affects.

202. The present-day envelope, the primary depository of contemporary architectural expression, is now invested in the production of affects, an uncoded, prelinguistic form of identity that transcends the propositional logic of more traditional political rhetoric.
IV. Affects

202: The modular grid, indifferent to the relative influence of individuals or politically active subgroups, embodied the ideals of democratic equality... nonhierarchical organizations in which individuals are equal and will submit to the will of the majority. However, emerging social structures characteristic of globalized societies... social assemblages, individuals, groups... are primarily defined by relations of exteriority, and need to engage with different assemblages without losing their identity... The allometric modularities and variable repetitions that emerge as traits of expression in many of the new envelopes cited above are probably more adequate to express collective purpose within a modular system and to represent “weighted” models of democracy...
...A progressive discipline constantly challenges the status quo, and therefore needs to develop political strategies to maintain a relation with power while simultaneously investigating and opening its structures.

Instead of a revolutionary architecture, an architecture of explicitation would imply more complex political directionalities as it transforms the space and the material organization of the built environment, even if those transformations cannot be inscribed in a holistic political program.

Once energy flows in and out of a system, the number and type of possible historical outcomes greatly increases. Instead of a unique and simple equilibrium, there are now multiple ones of varying complexity regulating their attached power regimes. By analyzing the building envelope, architects may be able to re-empower the practice of architecture as a truly transformative force in the reorganization of power ecologies.
I. Politics

194: *Paper architecture*, for example, has lost its effectiveness as a political vehicle…

194: A unilateral politics of *resistance* is no longer able to challenge contemporary forms of *consolidated power*.

194: …Architecture is as much a physical construct as it is a social or political one…

195: It may be good to stop speaking of *power* in general, or the *state, capital, globalization, empire* in general, and instead address specific *ecologies of power*…

*Has the totalization of capitalism superannuated revolution? Can realms or ecologies of power offer a more viable forum for architectural intervention in politics?*
II. Envelope

195: The envelope has the capacity to represent the ancient political role that articulates the relationships between humans and nonhumans in a common world.

196: …Faciality is sustained because certain arrangements of power need to have a face. Facialization organizes systems of binary opposition… power structures configure private and public, inside and outside… As a homeostatic membrane, [the envelope] is a crucial component of the organization of power regimes in the building.

197: A discipline of the building envelope capable of remaining attached to reality and yet resistant to consolidation will enable architecture to produce effects that may actually destabilize power regimes rather than function as their mere representation, whether of the status quo or its resisting parties.

How could a building envelope that resists consolidation destabilize power regimes?
III. Faciality

198: The building envelope has become the last precinct of architectural power.

198: How does one construct the face of the faceless?

199: The current proliferation of alternative political practices, such as trends, movements, and other *affect-driven* political forms, runs parallel to the development of envelopes that resist primitive models of *faciality*, that are no longer structured on the oppositions between front and back, private and public, or roof and wall.

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2 ...Proposed by Deleuze to address the theorization of systems of expression or representation.

*Has architecture lost all political potency or have architects simply lost political agency?*
IV. Affects

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Is the envelope’s only political act to superficially mimic idealised social structures?
V. Dimension

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204: Once energy flows in and out of a system, the number and type of possible historical outcomes greatly increases. Instead of a unique and simple equilibrium, there are now multiple ones of varying complexity regulating their attached power regimes. By analyzing the building envelope, architects may be able to re-empower the practice of architecture as a truly transformative force in the reorganization of power ecologies.

*In lieu of revolution, how can architectural envelopes find openings in power structures?*