

# domus

## The irony of modernity

Through the lens of "Irony," Emmanuel Petit examines the work of five architects: Venturi and Scott Brown, Tigerman, Isozaki, Eisenman, and Koolhaas. And gets very deep below the surface to lay bare many of the most satisfying intellectual projects in architectural history.

By Matt Shaw

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Emmanuel Petit, *Irony; or, The Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture*, Yale Press 2013, 272 pp.

"Post-modern" architecture gets a bad rap. Called everything from "transvestite architecture", to "architectural vandalism", the intellectual movement of "Post-modernism" that surfaced in the mid-1950s devolved into a stylistic, superficial fad, commonly known as "PoMo" by the early 80s.



Emmanuel Petit, *Irony; or, The Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture*, Yale Press 2013

In his new book *Irony Or, The Self Critical Opacity of Post-modern Architecture*, architect and educator Emmanuel Petit re-animates the intellectual project which has been so fundamentally influential to architecture in the last half-century. Through the lens of "Irony", he examines the work of five architects: Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, Stanley Tigerman, Arata Isozaki, Peter Eisenman, and Rem Koolhaas. Through a rigorously researched and precisely written analysis, Petit gets very deep below the surface of architecture to lay bare many of the most satisfying intellectual projects in architectural history.



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Petit's book takes back territory from the "ew! PoMo!" crowd, and posits the architecture of the 60s, 70s, and early 80s as something rich with content, both within the history and discipline of architecture, and also within the broader cultural shifts that were taking place during those periods. He draws upon literary criticism, philosophy, and theories of humour to find the many ways in which irony was deployed in the architecture of that generation. This lens is focused tightly, and provides an entry point into the work that Petit identifies as containing "irony", as a (usually) serious device. The book can, at times, be quite dense with information, and contains many references that require some prior knowledge. It is very easy to read, considering the topic, and is incredibly rewarding for those who take the time to navigate some of the references.



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Each chapter deals with the "ironic" problem of a contradictory condition of modernity. Architecture is situated between two paradoxical realities: the absolute, utopian, and rational visions of the creator (architect), and the messy, irrational, and pluralistic real world. The first chapter deals with the work of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. For Petit, the use of history in the Venturi's work is not a historicist revival, but an ironic gesture, which helped to solidify their social agenda (populism) and their theories about communication in architecture. By tracing the influence of the New Critics on Venturi, Petit lays out how Venturi saw buildings and cities as "texts", with relationships not only between parts of each text, but with relationship to one another. This is the foundation upon which their deeply contextual attitude toward building was formed. It was the "messy vitality" of the built environment that Venturi's work focused on, with serious consideration given for what Modernism had attempted to avoid. It was this non-judgmental attitude toward architecture that marked the most radical shift from Modernism, and also brought into architecture a new language, and thus the most serious ironic dilemmas (in a good way).



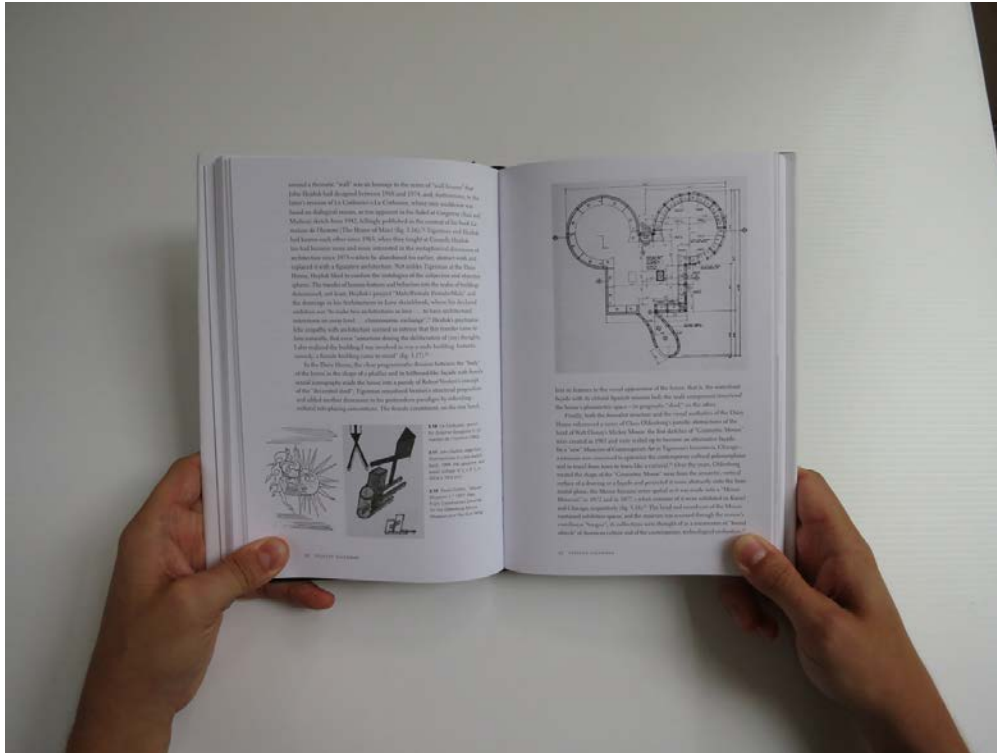
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Stanley Tigerman takes a similar ironic position, but one that is more personal. For Venturi, the ironic plays on form and meaning were meant to bridge social classes and taste cultures. For Tigerman, the subjective, singular role of the artist becomes narrated against a backdrop of pseudo-objective, rigid architectural Modernism. This was manifest in Tigerman's architecture as a blunt and often methodical refusal and subversion of the "perfection" of Miesian Modernism. His position was developed through his own personal character, was free of the shackles of a unitary way of thinking about architecture. Tigerman was also perhaps the most outwardly philosophical, as his "Architoons" make explicit references to philosophers and architects alike. Tigerman also uses humour as an act of subverting what he saw as an oppressive and harmful seriousness in Modernism. For instance, one of his proposals is called "Bathroom Addition as Homage to Dante's Inferno".



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Less of a troublemaker than Tigerman and Venturi, Arata Isozaki's personal story is one which is intricately linked to his upbringing in Japan during World War II. He was linked to the Metabolists in his early career, but broke from the group due to what he saw as naive positivism. Isozaki had seen not only the effects of history upon the city, but also the destruction of the city during the War. This profoundly influenced Isozaki, and his work was often very dark. The irony of the simultaneous presence of history and the ambition of the future was the foundation for much of the work that Isozaki did during this period, especially his work with using the allegory of a "ruin". He also drew upon Japanese philosophy and its parallels with Western thought. Isozaki's work, like the rest of the architects here, recognized the disciplinary dilemma of architecture: a singular creator who attempts to make the world in an ideal image, and the realities of the world that bound the work physically and metaphorically. For Isozaki, this was manifest as ruin, darkness, and the possibility of a complete collapse at all times, providing irony when contrasted in his work with the very idea of building anew.



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The fourth chapter is the weakest and least fulfilling chapter, not because Petit relents with his research or writing, but because the subject matter perhaps does not fit so well here. The book begins to historicize Peter Eisenman's work, which seems to hold up poorly under the lens of time and does not appear as relevant today as the other architects' work. In comparison with Koolhaas' and Venturi and Scott Brown's early projects, Eisenman's work seems banal and stale, as Venturi and Koolhaas both attempted, in built works and texts, to connect to social issues outside of the discipline (Eisenman's experiments with linguistic theory don't count). The lesson from Eisenman that may be most relevant today is the vapid milieu which surrounds an architect's work. The chapter also illustrates, through the work presented, and also the text describing and analysing the work, that the project of autonomy has clearly contributed to the architecture's alienation from culture *writ large*, and thus its current unemployment crisis.





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The final chapter examines the early work of Rem Koolhaas. In a similar dilemma as the other architects, Koolhaas considered the irony between the ambitions of Modernism of creating a unitary, prescribed environment where utopia could exist, and the social and realities of people moving around within these worlds. For Koolhaas, there was also a disconnection between the disciplinary tropes of scale, representation, etc., and the world outside of architecture (the context of the metropolis). This awareness of the realism of the everyday world, the collective ambitions of the population of a city, and architecture's struggle to confront it is what makes the position of the architect within society ironic. Koolhaas admired Cedric Price for his "pseudo anti-intellectualism" and his keen awareness of the everyday, as well as his critique of some of the most entrenched traditions of the profession. This is the essence of the "self-critical opacity of Post-modern architecture". As Petit sees it, the ultimate irony of this period in architectural history was in intra-disciplinary struggle to find a position and self-identity in the face of a radically changing world, post-modernity. All in all, the book serves as a very well-written and thoughtfully crafted survey of one of the richest periods in architectural history.

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<http://www.domusweb.it/en/reviews/2013/08/23/irony.html>