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# ARCHITECTURAL AUTONOMY AND THE URBAN CONDITION

MIGUEL LOPEZ MELENDEZ  
FOREWORD BY CHARLES WALDHEIM



# Architectural Autonomy and the Urban Condition

*Architectural Autonomy and the Urban Condition* revisits a controversial theme in architectural theory and history. This book reframes “autonomy” as a cultural issue rather than a purely disciplinary debate centered on architectural form. It offers the first urban formulation of “autonomy” by tracing philosophical, artistic, and political histories of the term while challenging narcissistic tendencies of architectural autonomy.

This volume examines the forgotten urban genesis of the autonomy of architecture during the interwar period and surveys the writings and projects of Peter Eisenman and Aldo Rossi, who redefined the disciplinary parameters of architecture amid the cultural unrest of the 1960s and 1970s. It contrasts the North American focus on formal concerns with the Italian commitment to urban realities. Stepping back from the polarization between critical theory and post-critical discourse, this book proposes a projective theory that is sensitive but not subservient to cultural processes—an operative theory that envisions the world as it ought to be rather than merely accepting it as it is.

This volume vindicates the cultural sensibility of critical design frameworks in an urban age in which urgent solutions often eclipse the reflection of theory and the patience of research. It will appeal to scholars and researchers in architecture and urbanism who are interested in the relationship of architecture with philosophy, political theory, and art.

**Miguel Lopez Melendez** is the founder of D A COOP—Design As COOPERation, an international design and research office focused on urban challenges. He holds a Doctor of Design and a Master of Architecture in Urban Design from Harvard University Graduate School of Design (GSD) as well as a Bachelor of Architecture from Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mexico. Miguel has served as a Global Visiting Faculty at Tecnológico de Monterrey, Visiting Instructor at Louisiana State University, and Research Associate, Research Assistant, and Teaching Fellow at Harvard GSD.

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# **Architectural Autonomy and the Urban Condition**

**Miguel Lopez Melendez**

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*To Maria Alicia, Miguel, Alicia, and Denny—who have taught me to love and to be loved—and to Charles, Mohsen, and George—who accompanied and guided me through the intellectual solitude of doctoral research.*



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*La luz del poeta es la contradicción. Desde luego no he pretendido vencer a nadie. Sería indigno de la poesía si adoptara esta posición. La poesía no quiere adeptos, sino amantes. Pone ramas de zarzamora y erizos de vidrio para que se hieran por amor las manos que la buscan.*

(The poet's light is contradiction. Of course, I have never intended to convince anyone; it would be unworthy of poetry to take such a stance. Poetry does not seek followers, but lovers. It lays down bramble branches and glass hedgehogs so that the hands that seek it may wound themselves out of love.)

I think of the friends I have met along the way—in Mexico City, Madrid, Boston, Baton Rouge, Amsterdam, and London—whose presence I cherish and miss as I follow new paths. The content of the following pages also draws on what I have learned by their side.



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# Foreword

*Charles Waldheim*

*Architectural Autonomy and the Urban Condition* revisits the debates on architecture's putative potential for autonomy. In so doing, Miguel Lopez Melendez reminds us of the central role of the question of the city in that project. Beginning with its original formulation by Viennese historian Emil Kaufmann in 1933, the autonomy of architecture has been explored and expounded by a diverse array of authors. Kaufmann's original articulation of the idea was informed by his interest in the relations between French architecture in the late eighteenth century and the Enlightenment. Kaufmann came to describe the work of architects such as Etienne-Louis Boullée and Claude Nicolas Ledoux as "revolutionary" as he argued they advanced the Enlightenment principles of individual rights in relation to the state. In this sense, Kaufmann advocated for an architecture of pure art based in the radical independence of individual architects in relation to the state. Since Kaufmann's formulation of the idea, the autonomy of architecture has been contested on a number of intellectual and ideological fronts. While the notion has not been precisely perennial, multiple generations of architects, authors, and critics have returned occasionally to the concept to advance their own positions.

Lopez Melendez's account in this volume returns to the original formulation and sheds significant new light on the intellectual origins and cultural reception of the concept. This book productively returns to the central role of the urban in relation to architectural autonomy, an aspect of the topic that has been relatively underappreciated of late. This text advances our collective understanding of the concept through a rereading of the various polemics and cultural politics associated with the idea while surveying a range of intellectual and cultural debates. Among those, this book focuses on the articulation of architecture's potential autonomy in the writing and works of two notable architects, Aldo Rossi and Peter Eisenman. In divergent, yet complementary ways, Eisenman and Rossi reformulated an architecture of autonomy in their own image, in very different contexts. Lopez Melendez's rereading of their propositions is particularly relevant today, as contemporary authors and architects return to the project of autonomy and debate its relevance for the challenges of our day. In so doing, this volume reasserts the centrality of the urban to architecture's putative autonomy today, while advancing our understanding of the idea's contested histories and potential futures.



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# Introduction

## Too Many Things and Not Enough Forms

There is more to art than the straightness of lines and the perfection of surfaces. Plasticity of style is not as large as the entire idea... We have too many things and not enough forms.

—Gustave Flaubert

To say that the debate on “autonomy” in architecture is controversial would be an understatement. The cultural depth of a term that records the modern construction of Western individual consciousness and the role design plays in society has been reduced to a disciplinary issue that polarizes promoters and detractors. Theorists and historians have focused on architecture and overemphasized architectural form when addressing “autonomy” as a design theme, overlooking both the culturally constructed history of autonomy and the latent urban narrative of the autonomy of architecture. Erudition and technical prowess often reduce architecture to formal virtuosity at the expense of life, as the above quote by Gustave Flaubert suggests. This volume proposes the first urban formulation of “autonomy” by tracing philosophical, artistic, and political histories of the term to expand the critical and spatial scope of the autonomous debate for design audiences while challenging the self-referential tendencies of architectural autonomy.

*Architectural Autonomy and the Urban Condition* examines the forgotten urban origin of the seminal formulation of architectural autonomy during the interwar period and surveys the writings and projects of Peter Eisenman and Aldo Rossi. Both architects promoted the return to the disciplinary debate through “autonomy” on both sides of the Atlantic to counter the commodification of culture, the professionalism of architecture, reliance on quantitative methods, and the degradation of the modern city amid the cultural unrest of the 1960s and 1970s. This book examines their mutual interests and their contrasting positions. It analyzes the conceptual focus on architectural form in the name of autonomy as a retreat from cultural processes in the United States and the political commitment of Italian architects with urban phenomena through an engaged autonomy. Stepping back from the polarization between the exploitation of “autonomy” by an alienating critical theory and the pragmatic response of “post-critical” approaches, this volume offers an alternative interpretation of autonomy in design to counter sterile

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fundamentalisms. It offers a projective theory that vindicates the cultural sensibility of critical frameworks in an urban age in which the urgency of the answer often eclipses the patience of research.

### Autonomy

Terminology normally clarifies the meaning of words, but the definition of the term “autonomy” operates otherwise. Autonomy suggests creating *ex nihilo*—out of nothing—a “freedom from external influence.”<sup>1</sup> The dictionary reveals the critical character of the term only as a half-truth, concealing its sociohistorical determinacy and ideological motivation.

Autonomy (from the ancient Greek *αὐτονομία*: *autos* = self + *nomos* = law) refers to the right and capacity of an individual or a collectivity to govern itself according to its own laws. In medieval times, it differentiated the state from the church, while its modern use explains our contemporary understanding of aesthetics derived from the rational revolution of the philosopher Immanuel Kant.<sup>2</sup> Architectural interpretations of autonomy have rarely acknowledged that the philosophical roots of the term attest to a self-governing condition that nevertheless is culturally and historically determined. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Contrat Social* preceded Immanuel Kant’s “autonomy of the will” toward the emancipation of the modern consciousness of the individual. The paradigmatic consequence of the rational awakening of the Enlightenment was the French Revolution, which reduced the preceding centuries to a “prehistory,” according to Karl Marx.<sup>3</sup> The critical character of autonomy is both cause and consequence of Western cultural development.

It is not a coincidence that autonomy constantly reemerges when Western societies face existential crises. The tension between a critical method and cultural contingencies inherent in autonomy played an important role in the outbreak of the mother of Western Revolutions (The French Revolution); the aesthetic rebellion of Cubism and Dadaism; the political rift in modernity that the two World Wars represented; and the formulation of *autonomen Architektur* by a brave Jewish scholar in 1933, when Nazism rose to power. Autonomy has historically offered a productive reflection on the roles played by philosophy, art, political theory, and architecture, among other cultural realms, in society. It paradoxically tackles unsolvable questions formulated by individuals, collectivities, cultures, or disciplines throughout the history of humanity: who am I? Who are we? The political, social, economic, and environmental challenges, which the Covid-19 pandemic and current geopolitical unrest only exacerbate, suggest that the urban interpretation of autonomy is justified and urgent as a reevaluation of the role design plays in contemporary cultural and urban conditions.

Autonomy oscillates between a self-governing *condition* (a state) and a *position* (an opinion). Paradoxically, it implies a critical distance from cultural and historical circumstances that nevertheless justify, explain, and constitute that critical reflection. The cultural, historical, and ideological complexity conveyed by the term has been gradually repressed in design as its philosophical roots faded into oblivion.