How should the question of the “political” be addressed in architecture discourse? In what sense architecture is political? In what way has architecture been affected by the current “post-political” discourse and how did we end up with de-politicization of architecture in discourse of the academia? What discourse and what agency in academia are responsible for this state of de-politicization? In confrontation with this state, a more fundamental question must be asked: Can the question of the political in architecture be discussed in separation from the discourse of aesthetics? How should this relationship be framed? To begin to provide answers to these equations, it would be necessary to state that in any discussion of the “political” in architecture, we must take into consideration the important distinction which has been made in contemporary discourse of the political philosophy, that is, the distinction between the notion of “politics” (la politique) as opposed to the “political” (le politique).

In the face of this shortcoming it is an urgent task to frame the question of the “political” in architecture discourse in order to seriously confront the wholesale submission of architecture to the imperatives of the neo-liberal political and cultural order by misguided “liberal-left” block in academia (but who are they?) Against this block, I propose a “leftist political ontology” and claim that this ontology must guide us toward a radical critique of architecture in current post-political environment. Rancière work is one, if not the most influential, of this political ontology. For my purpose, I adopt the central concept of Dissensus in Rancière and explore its relevance for architecture theory and practice. I will examine the novel theses that Rancière has advanced concerning the relation between politics and aesthetics around the notions of “autonomy” and “heteronomy,” and will then argue that they usefully can illuminate our way for framing the question of politics in architecture.
There has never been any “aestheticization” of politics in the modern age because politics is aesthetics in principle.
Jacques Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy

Prologue:

Has the time of architecture not arrived to enter the never achievable purity of its closure from the political? How can the link presumed by the “and” make thought circulate between the two? What does it take to put architecture under the condition of politics? Do we mean by this politics an emancipatory or revolutionary politics? Why should we put architecture under this condition in the first place? One word defines the entire tenet of radical political modernity: Equality. Is it legitimate to force architecture into this tenet? Before any of these questions can be undertaken, a more primary question must be posed: what do we understand by the term “politics” (la politique)? To state the obvious, it must be clear from the outset that without having a political theory, or better, without a theoretical conception of political agency, we cannot have an understanding of politics. Among the contemporary thinkers of radical philosophy, Jacques Rancière is the one who has presented us with one of the most novel concepts of politics. I want to take up his ideas for the theses I am putting forward in this presentation. But first I must make a confession: I am among those who have been seduced by the phrase that now has become famous in France and elsewhere, which is: “le partage du sensible,” translated as “distribution or partition of the sensible.” I shall come back to this term later. My primary reason to go to the work of Rancière is this: no one among the contemporary thinkers on the radical Left — Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, to name only a few — has put the concept of politics under the notion of aesthetics better than Rancière. This is his singularity among all other radical political thinkers of our time, which makes his work most relevant for our purpose at hand. Before I begin to reflect on Rancière, I should quickly say that for Rancière politics occurs in intermittent acts of Dissensus (dissension). This Latin term Dissensus, which I have adopted for my title in conjunction with “practice of building,” (notice I am not using the word “architecture,” for reasons that will be explained later) begs an explanation.

Before I proceed further, I must add a caveat if we must attempt to put architecture under the condition of politics in the contemporary discourse. It is an imperative that we radically break with the abolition of politics in academia, which verges on anti-political orientation now negatively impacting our discipline. How did we get here? In the last three decades, and up to present time, we have encountered a misadventure by a group of intellectual elites, who have
aggressively aligned the discourse of the discipline with hegemonic poststructuralist philosophy in its different brands, the most dominating of which still prevalent and is represented by the Neo-Spinozian-Deleuzian-Negrian philosophical thought. The problem is not with the importation of this philosophical line into the discourse of the discipline, but rather, it resides in its misuse, which has aligned architecture discourse effectively with the imperatives of the neoliberal post-political ideology. These intellectual chic of academia have taken shelter behind their excessive theoreticism that is the obverse underside of their anti-political position. By importing Deconstruction in 1980s — which coincided with the beginning of aggressive neoliberal agenda — and later in 1990s, by adopting Deleuzian Fold, these young liberal conservative elites wanted to outdo the so-called “critical” stand of their older master in killing the Oedipal father, Peter Eisenman, unabashedly delivered architecture to the aesthetic ideology of pure sensuous pleasure by a fallacious intellectual exercise, debunking the radical critique of the 1960s and early 1970s through apolitical misreading of their philosophical masters twisting it further to suit their academic agenda. By bracketing the political content in the same philosophy, the architectural exponents of this trend shamelessly dumped anything that smelled or sounded to them political or “critical,” yet, paradoxically, made an extravagant claim to politicality. To countervail this trend — and this is my second pre-condition — I contend that this post-political disorientation in the discipline must be confronted and opposed by a radical political philosophy in which political subjectivity must constitute the main vector. I claim that no philosophy can be legitimately brought into the discipline if it is not under the sign of politics. As soon as we meet these pre-conditions, then we can raise the following questions: What political theory we should be after and how should the idea of the political be framed in the discourse of the discipline? Is politics inherent or immanent in architecture as opposed to other forms of ideology? And if not, to what act of politicization it must be subjected? Is not architecture the main vector over the configuration of culture and ideology? Where does architecture enter in the link between art and politics, at least in the way Jacques Rancière has presented it? Lastly, can politics in architecture be discussed without discussing aesthetics? In our itinerary to address these questions, I maintain that Rancière’s discourse, notwithstanding serious reservations against it by some other political thinkers, when it comes to link art to politics, along with his famous twin notions of “politics of aesthetics” and “aesthetics of politics,” may be the best to guide us. As I will discuss shortly, for Rancière, there is politics in aesthetics and aesthetics is politics, and therefore one cannot discuss the one without the other. This is his most important contribution to contemporary radical philosophy and political theory. Let me mention that Rancière, not so uncharacteristic of other radical
thinkers of our time, has not discussed architecture in any fashion in his vast body of writings devoted to all forms of art, from literature to film, in respect with the link between art and politics. This I believe is a shortcoming in his work. But it must be acknowledged that his renovation of the theory of politics in conjunction with aesthetics, which was always in the center of political discourse of modernity, is the most stimulating body of thought in contemporary radical philosophy.

Before I can enter into Rancière’s discourse, I want to make some preliminary remarks.

Walter Benjamin once expressed his solidarity with the so-called “bad new things” against “good old things” when speaking positively about the so-called “new Barbarism” in his discussion of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier in the essay titled “Experience and Poverty,” penned in 1933. In this experience, the destruction of aura, in his view, “was the precondition of the enlightened grounding of art in politics.” In our own time, we are experiencing a reversal of this grounding. With the return of the cult of aura, politics has retreated to the prevailing postmodern post-politics, a denegation of politics in which architecture expresses more and more its solidarity with reactionary “good old things,” in returning the “art” of architecture to the ideology of aesthetics of sensuous pleasure, all the while reinforcing its solidarity with the “bad new thing” — that is, in our new digital technologies of simulation and its “accelerated mode of perception” in the human sensorium. With this reversal, architecture has been elevated to the level of “high art” in contemporary culture, which is its only mode of reception. I contend that this elevation is reactionary and is untenable. The critique of this state requires first and foremost a political theory linked to a certain doctrine of aesthetics. Walter Benjamin’s analysis of “mechanical art” related to politics and aesthetics in the *Artwork* essay does not seem to be anymore an adequate conceptual framework. The nefarious ideological impact of architecture over culture, today, is in need of another theoretical framework. It is in this respect that we should heed Rancière’s challenge to Benjamin’s notion of “aestheticization of politics.” I maintain that his challenge is enormously instructive for a critique of architecture when its discourse is put in the link between art and politics. Rancière has questioned the guiding assumption about the connection between these two realms, against the conviction that art and politics are two separate domains and therefore in need of being linked together. Rather, he has uniquely advanced the idea that “art and politics are consubstantial insofar as they both organize a common world of self-evident facts of sensory perception.” This is formulated in his famous “the distribution of the sensible” that I mentioned earlier. What we should notice is that Rancière does not only reject that there is a priori separation between art and politics, but he also argues that these are “contingent notions.” He writes: “The fact that
there are always forms of power does not mean that there is always such a thing as politics, and the fact there is music or sculpture in a society does not mean that art is constituted as an independent category." iv At the center of Rancière’s highly original thesis is the problem of the “political subjectivization” that I want to extend to the political theory in architecture. In this relation, let me categorically assert that contemporary architecture in its current configuration inhibits political subjectivization. This requires a definite and firm against its institutional practice, which must be achieved through working out a new political theory.

In this presentation, I try to advance certain theses that I have developed based on Rancière’s thoughts. As I said a moment ago, I take issue with contemporary adulation of architecture as high art and will pose a challenge to the term “architecture” itself as opposed to the term “building.” We have learned from Theodore Adorno that it is no longer possible to create art under the banner of high art in contemporary world unless it is for a reactionary political ends. In the light of this, I want to propose the term “post-architecture,” that must be taken as a term of negation to overcome the current veneration of architecture as high art, and to that end, I propose to return to the notion of “building.” Contrary to common understanding, I claim, that the word building does not only carry a prosaic connotations devoid of philosophical meaning. I take this position in order to blur the distinction between what is conceived as “high” and what is considered to be “low.” This distinction, you may remember, is the one that plagued the entire modernist discourse in the twentieth century. I use the name “building,” at the same time, to challenge the undivided notion of archê in the hierarchical understanding of “architecture.” I therefore want to pursue the political implications that will follow this determination of the word “building.” As the title of my presentation indicates, I put the notion of “practice of building” in conjunction within the notion of “dissensus,” a key term in Rancière’s work, with the corollary link between aesthetics and politics. I argue that this will help to formulate a critique of prevailing de-politicization of architecture in contemporary discourse.

We have learned from Rancière that it is not anymore possible to frame the concept of politics without the thinking of aesthetics within what he has termed as the “aesthetic regime of the art,” or the “revolution” of aesthetics in his original reading of Friedrich Schiller’s On the Aesthetic Education of Man in the late 18th century, in which Schiller claim that aesthetic “will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the art of living.” This grounds the autonomy of art by connecting it to the hope of “changing life.” As one commentator on Rancière’s work has aptly pointed out, “The productively ambiguous formula of this politics is that ‘art is an autonomous form of life.’”v Rancière put the entire question of “politics of aesthetics” on this
conjunction of the “and.” In this respect, the distinction that Benjamin made in the epilogue of the *Artwork* essay where he contrasted Fascist “aestheticization of politics” with the progressive communist “politics of aesthetic” is perhaps no longer an adequate distinction. To this effect, Rancière in his masterpiece of political theory, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, has categorically claimed, “There never has been any ‘aestheticization’ of politics in the modern age because politics is aesthetics in principle.”vi He further adds, “But the autonomization of aesthetics as a new nexus between the order of logos and the partition of perceptible is part of the modern configuration of politics.”vii I propose that we have to begin from this statement over Benjamin’s historical thought on the link between art and politics.

In order to make sense of what I have termed “building dissensus,” I need to briefly discuss the main concepts and terminologies in Rancière’s work (by no mean exhaustive) with which I am concerned here. I will then attempt to reflect on the theses that I have advanced based on his ideas.

**Part I: Reflection on Jacques Rancière’s Thoughts on Aesthetics and Politics**

1 *Post-politics*. In the last decade of the twentieth century, with the end of Cold War and the collapse of Eastern European communism, the emergence of the “third way” politics, and the subsequent rise of neoliberalism, our time is marked by the “end” of politics, or what is called as postmodern *post-politics*. Post-politics is the suspension of politics and its reduction to mere bureaucratic engineering, expert management and administration. In this state, the global ideological visions of parties struggling and competing for power is replaced by “the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinions specialists…) and liberal multiculturalists; the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus.”viii In Rancière’s terms, this “universal consensus” amounts to what he calls the “police” order. This order must be understood within the definition of other key concept in Rancière’s work, which is, “le partage du sensible” or the “distribution, or partition, of the sensible.” This novel notion, in Rancière own definition, basically means, “a system of coordinates defining modes of being, doing, making, and communicating that establishes the borders between the visible and the invisible, the audible, and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable.”ix According to this definition, then, “the essence of police is not repression but rather a certain distribution of the Sensible that precludes the emergence of politics.”x

2 *Politics*. In *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Rancière reflects on his notion of “politics” on a series of
statements and definitions of which I want to cite only a few:

*Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part.*\(^\text{xi}\)

*Politics exists simply because no social order is based on nature, no divine law regulates human society.*\(^\text{xii}\)

To Recapitulate: politics exists wherever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part.\(^\text{xiii}\)

The only city is a political one and politics begins with egalitarian contingency.\(^\text{xiv}\)

Thus Plato’s city is not political. But a nonpolitical city is not city at all… The only city is a political one and politics begins with egalitarian contingency.\(^\text{xv}\)

For Rancière, therefore, the essence of politics “resides in act of subjectivization that separates society from itself by challenging the ‘natural order of bodies’ in the name of equality and polemically reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible. Politics is an anarchical process of emancipation that opposes the logic of disagreement to the logic of police.” In this regard it is important to bear in mind Rancière’s definition of the “political subject”: “A political subject is neither a political lobby nor an individual who seeks an adequate representation for his or her interest and ideas. It is an empty operator that produces cases of political dispute by challenging the established framework of identification and classification. Through the process of subjectivization, political subject brings politics proper into existence and confront the police order…”\(^\text{xvi}\)

I should mention here the distinction between the “Political” (le politique) and “Politics” (La politique). Rancière considers “the Political” as the meeting ground between Politics and the Police. “In this sense, the political is the terrain upon which the verification of equality confronts the established order of identification and classification.”\(^\text{xvii}\)

3

Aesthetics: According to Rancière, two hundred years ago, around the beginning of the nineteenth century, an “aesthetic revolution” occurred, which he calls the “aesthetic regime of art” as opposed to two previous regimes of art, mainly the “ethical regime of image,” and “representative regime of art.” Aesthetics, taken within the broader “aesthetic regime of art,” refers to the “distribution of the sensible” that “determines a mode of articulation between forms of action, production, perception, and thought. This general definition extends aesthetic beyond the restrict real of art to include the conceptual coordinates and mode of visibility operative in the political domain.”\(^\text{xviii}\) Rancière argues that “aesthetics” proves fundamental to politics. He writes: “There is thus an ‘aesthetics’ at the core of politics,
that has nothing to do with Benjamin’s discussion of the aestheticization of politics. Specific to the ‘ages of the masses.’ As Rancière explains, “artistic practices” are “forms of visibility” that, as a commentator of his work, Samuel Chambers, remarks, “can themselves serve as interruption of the given partition of the sensible.”

4 Dissensus. For Rancière, politics and aesthetics are the two forms of dissensus. These two forms of activities, each in their own way, effect a redistribution of the sensible. It can be shown that “politics has an inherently aesthetic dimension and aesthetics an inherently political one.” As Steven Corcoran explains, “If forms of dissensus are irreducible to the objectivity of the situation, it is by virtue of what Rancière refers to as their forms of egalitarian suspension of the ‘normal’ count of the social order ... the normal point around which both activities revolve, and which ensures their interrelation, is that both are forms of ‘dissensus.’ The logic of dissensus is the opposite of logic of consensus, which every dissensus disrupts. Consensus is the work of the police. That is, the essence of consensus is “the supposition of an identity between the sense and sense, between a fact and its interpretation, between speech and its account, between a factual status and assignation of rights. By contrast, the logic of dissensus consists in the demonstration of certain impropriety, which disrupts the identity and reveals the gap between poeisis (way of doing) and aisthesis (or horizon of affects). It is significant that politics for Rancière is always aesthetics in a basic sense. His insistence on the aesthetic dimension of politics effectively separate Rancière’s notion from those involving the application of aesthetics to forms of authoritarian powers, mainly fascism, the one Walter Benjamin aimed at under the concept of the “aestheticization of the politics.”

In “Ten Theses on Politics,” Rancière succinctly asserts: “The essence of politics is dissensus.” He adds, “Dissensus is not confrontation between interests of opinions. It is the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself.”

Part II: Theses on Architecture Between Art and Politics

5 Based on the above reflections on Rancière’s concepts, I want to outline some theses around the notion of “Building Dissensus.” This primarily means, after Rancière, to put building discourse between art and politics, within the specific sense of the “Aesthetic Regime of Art,” and under the thesis of the “distribution of the sensible.” I should warn the reader that the theses I am advancing here are tentative and by no means exhaustive or comprehensive, as they are a work in progress.

The starting point is the idea of “political subjectivization,” which is at the core of Rancière’s political thoughts. I claim that contemporary architecture discourse has put a ban
on “political subjectivization.” This means that, in the last three decades, it has “de-subjectified” the political subject in an act of de-politicization of its discourse. This de-politicization is the dialectical underside of an aesthetic ideology, sensuous excess of digitally generated architectonics, that is achieved by putting architecture on the pedestal of “high art” in contemporary culture. This dominant trend has thus blocked a discourse of architecture that belongs to the nexus of art and politics. I claim that “building,” in its difference from architecture, must be the main vector of political subjectivization over any other art forms in the contemporary constellation of ideology relating to contemporary culture. I link the notion of “political subjectivization” to the notion of dispositif. We can then talk about the notion of architectural dispositif, or the role it plays in the political subjectivization. Let me briefly reflect on these two notions.

6
I use the term dispositif in the sense discussed by Michel Foucault. The original French word has larger connotations that the word “apparatus” in English translation does not. Michael Foucault, in an interview titled “The Confession of the Flesh,” published in Power/Knowledge, speaks about the term “apparatus” (dispositif): “What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly a thorough heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions — in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, What I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements.” xxvi Giorgio Agamben in “What is an Apparatus?” expands on Foucault’s idea and adds his own interpretation. He writes: “I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gesture, behavior, opinions, or discourse of living beings.” xxvii He further writes: “Apparatus, then, is first of all a machine that produces subjectification, and only as such is it also a machine of governance.” xxviii Slavoj Žižek, discussing Agamben’s reflection on the same concept, further extends it to Althusser ISA (Ideological State Apparatus) and to Lacan’s “Big Other” in terms of the intimate relation between “subjectification” and “desubjectification.” He writes: “Foucault, Althusser, and Lacan each insist on the crucial ambiguity of the term “Subject” (signifying both a free agent and subjection to power) — the subject qua free agent emerges through its subjection to the dispositif/ISA/big Other.” He then adds, “As Agamben points out, ‘desubjectification’ (“Alienation”) and subjectification are thus two sides of the same coin: it is the very desubjectification of living being, its
subordination to a dispositif, which subjectivises it."

7 Now the question is this: Does not contemporary architectural dispositif effectively desubjectivize the subject by subordinating it to its dispositif? But where does the subjectification, as its reverse side, enter in to this act and who is the political subject? For Rancière, the political subject “brings politics proper into existence and confronts the police order with the heterology of emancipation.”

For Rancière political subjects “forever remain precarious figures that hesitate at the borders of silence maintained by the police order.” And, politics only exists in an empty operator: Dissensus. “The essence of politics thus resides in acts of subjectivization that separate society from itself by challenging the “natural order of bodies” in the name of equality and polemically reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible. Politics is an anarchical process of emancipation that opposes the logic of disagreement to the logic of police.”

How can then this be transposed to the notion of “Building as practice of Dissensus,” one might ask?

8 To attempt an answer I contend that we first examine the organization of the word and the concept Architecture itself as we know it tradition of our discipline and its usage both in classical and modern times. The whole enterprise of Deconstruction imported into the architecture discipline for two decades, which attempted to put the word “architecture” under erasure, resulted only in failure at the most political level. I contend that immanent in this concept of architecture and its dichotomous opposite, i.e., “building” — which as I said has plagued the discourse of modernity — is inherently a hierarchical concept that fits the notion of police order in its “distribution of the sensible” in Rancière’s sense. This is my reason to co-opt the word Building in all the prosaic and philosophical meanings it signifies, for which I do not have time and space here to elaborate further. Suffice to say I put the practice of building in the practice of Dissensus which consists in “reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible, which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals.”

I contend that politics of building, like politics of art, consists in “suspending the normal coordinates of sensory experience.”


See Slavoj Žižek, The Ticklish Subject, The Absent Center of Political Ontology (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 198

See Jacques Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, ibid., Appendix 1, 89.


Ibid., 16.

Ibid., 123.

Ibid., 71.

Ibid.


Ibid. 89.

Ibid., 82.

Ibid., 13.


Rancière, Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics, ibid. 38.

Ibid.

Ibid., 20.


“Ibid., 20.


Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, Appendix 1, ibid., 90.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.