# "A Partial Synthesis":
# Debates on Architectural Realism

## Editorial

**Irina Davidovici**

# Editorial

**Irina Davidovici**
**ETH Zurich**

Addressing the theme of architectural Realism, the second issue of the peer-reviewed academic journal *bfo-Journal* explores various ideological and historical instances that circumscribe this powerful, yet ambivalent aesthetic category. Anchored in literature and painting, the historical art movement of Realism that dominated art production in France between the 1840s and the 1870s was defined by Linda Nochlin as the 'truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on the meticulous observation of contemporary life'.[1] Bruno Reichlin presented Neo-Realism in 1950s Italian cinema and literature as 'a surgical examination of matters of society, an almost documentary attention to the everyday, an adherence in thought and language to the social origins and personalities of the characters, a more-or-less direct criticism of current society and morals'.[2] The shift between these definitions indicates that, during the twentieth century, Realism became an increasingly politicised vehicle for varied, sometimes contradictory ideologies.

Realist architecture exists inasmuch as architecture is representational; by definition it pertains to representational arts – literature, painting, film – whereas architecture is ultimately anchored in reality. The paradox of Realism is that, in its attempt to conceptualise reality, it becomes excessively intellectualized and further isolated from it. As K. Michael Hays noted, architectural Realism is subject to 'two contradictory claims, one aesthetic and one epistemological', the former setting the work apart in 'a realm of heightened aesthetic intensity,' the latter connecting it to a particular historical and cultural situation and deriving its value from its response to this context.[3] Alan Colquhoun placed this category at the charged boundary between architecture as 'self-referential system', with its own traditions and value systems, and as a 'social product' shaped by wider social and economic circumstances. Realism could only be understood as a 'dialectical process, in which aesthetic norms are modified by external forces to achieve a partial synthesis'.[4]

The five scholarly articles featured in the current issue add to this debate three case studies of Realism in specific historical and cultural contexts, bracketed by two surveys discussing the wider circulation of independent, in fact contradictory, understandings of Realism. Silvia Malcovati's comprehensive essay examines cultural exchanges and imports between the Italian and German Realist discourses from the nineteenth century until the twenty-first, testifying to the notion's continued relevance. In relation
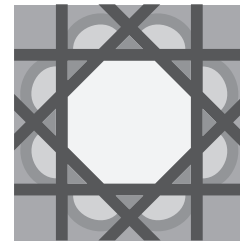
[1] Linda Nochlin, *Realism. Style and Civilisation*, (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), p. 13.

[2] Bruno Reichlin, "Figures of Neorealism in Italian Architecture" (Part 1), in: *Grey Room*, no. 5 (2001), p. 80.

[3] K. Michael Hays, ed., *Architecture Theory since 1968*, p. 254.

[4] Alan Colquhoun, "Rules, Realism, and History," in: *Essays in architectural criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 67, 74.

to Socialist Realism, Maria Silina investigates the influence of critics and theorists on the Soviet artistic and architectural production in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Katrin Siebert examines the influence of Socialist Realism in the work of Swiss architect Hans Schmidt, while Giulio Bettini investigates the theoretical and pictorial manifestations of Realism into the Milanese architecture of Mario Asnago and Claudio Vender. Finally, Caroline Dayer applies the Italian and German cultural dialogue to an examination of Magic Realism, from its origins in the works of Franz Roh and, in literature, Massimo Bontempelli, extending to the architecture of Mario Ridolfi and Carlo Scarpa. We hope that, viewed as a corpus, these five essays further the understanding of architectural Realism as a 'partial synthesis' of aesthetics and epistemology, the theory and the practice of architecture.