**Autonomy**: Aesthetic autonomy is the notion that culture is a sphere apart, with each art distinct, and it is a bad word for most of us raised on postmodernist interdisciplinarity. We tend to forget that autonomy is always provisional, always defined diacritically and situated politically, always semi. Enlightenment thinkers advocated political autonomy in order to challenge the vested interests of the ancien régime, while modernist artists advocated aesthetic autonomy in order to resist illustrational meanings and commercial forces. Like “essentialism,” then, “autonomy” is a bad word, but it may not always be a bad strategy, especially at a moment when postmodernist interdisciplinarity has become routine: call it “strategic autonomy.”

**Bonaventura**: In his seminal analysis of postmodern space, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson used the vast atrium of the Bonaventura Hotel in Los Angeles designed by John Portman as a symptom of a new kind of architectural sublime: a sort of hyper-space that deranges the human sensorium. Jameson took this spatial delirium as a particular instance of a general incapacity to comprehend the late capitalist universe, to map it cognitively. Strangely, what Jameson offered as a critique of postmodern culture many architects (Frank Gehry foremost among them) have taken as a paragon: the creation of extravagant spaces that work to overwhelm the subject, a neo-Baroque Sublime dedicated to the glory of the Corporation (which is the Church of our age). It is as if these architects designed not in contestation of “the cultural logic of late capitalism” but according to its specifications.

**Carcassonne**: Carcassonne is a tourist destination in southern France, a medieval cité replete with château, church, and fortifications. Viollet-le-Duc restored its towers and turrets in the nineteenth century, and the site retains an unreal sheen: it is a historical town turned into a theme park, with its walls whitened and capped.

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* This text was written in October 2001 as a supplement (part glossary, part guide) to my Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes) (London and New York: Verso, 2002).
like TV-star teeth. At least Americans make their Disneylands from scratch, or they once did so. More and more this Carcassonnization—the canonization of the urban carcass—is at work in American cities as well. For example, the cast-iron buildings of SoHo now gleam with the shine of artifacts-become-commodities. Like Viollet-le-Duc, developers undertake these face-lifts in the name of historical preservation, but the purpose is financial aggrandizement. And like victims of cosmetic surgery, these facades may mask historical age but advance mnemonic decay.

**Design:** Today everything—from architecture and art to jeans and genes—is treated as so much design. Those old heroes of industrial modernism, the artist-as-engineer and the author-as-producer, are long gone, and the postindustrial designer now rules supreme. Today you don’t have to be filthy rich to be designer and designed in one—whether the product in question is your home or business, your sagging face (designer surgery) or lagging personality (designer drugs), your historical memory (designer museum), or DNA future (designer children). Might this “designed subject” of consumerism be the unintended offspring of the “constructed subject” of postmodernism? One thing seems clear: today design abets a near-perfect circuit of production and consumption.

**Environment:** The world of total design is an old dream of modernism, but it only comes true, in perverse form, in our pan-capitalist present. With post-Fordist production, commodities can be tweaked and markets niched, so that a product can be mass in quantity yet appear personal in address. Desire is not only registered in products today, but is specified there: a self-interpellation is performed in catalogs and on-line almost automatically. In large part it is this perpetual profiling of the commodity that drives the contemporary inflation of design. Yet what happens when this commodity-machine breaks down, as markets crash, sweatshop workers resist, or environments give out?

**Finitude:** An early version of total design was advanced in Art Nouveau, with its will to ornament. This *Style 1900* found its great nemesis in Adolf Loos, who attacked it in several texts. One attack took the form of an allegorical skit about “a poor little rich man” who commissioned a designer to put “art in each and every thing”: “The architect has forgotten nothing, absolutely nothing. Cigar ashtrays, cutlery, light switches—everything, everything was made by him.” This *Gesamtkunstwerk* did more than combine art, architecture, and craft; it commingled subject and object: “the individuality of the owner was expressed in every ornament, every form, every nail.” For the Art Nouveau designer the result is perfection: “You are complete!” he exults to the owner. But the owner is not so sure; rather than a sanctuary from modern stress, he sees his Art Nouveau interior as another instance of it. “The happy man suddenly felt deeply, deeply unhappy. . . . He was precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring. He
thought, this is what it means to learn to go about life with one’s own corpse. Yes indeed. He is finished. He is complete.” For the Art Nouveau designer such completion reunited art and life, with all signs of death banished. For Loos this triumphant overcoming of limits was a catastrophic loss of the same—the loss of the objective constraints required to define any “future living and striving, developing and desiring.” Far from a transcendence of death, this loss of finitude was a death-in-life, living “with one’s own corpse.”

**Gesamtkunstwerk:** After September 11, metaphorical talk of corpses seems misbegotten, and confusions between art and life worse. Recall the remarks of Karlheinz Stockhausen on the World Trade Center attack: “What happened there is—they all have to rearrange their brains now—is the greatest work of art ever: that characters can bring about in one act what we in music cannot dream of, that people practice madly for ten years, completely, fanatically, for a concert and then die. That is the greatest work of art for the whole of the cosmos. I could not do that. Against that we composers are nothing.” Yet this reading of avant-gardism cannot be simply disavowed: with the simplest means the terrorists rocked our symbolic order like nothing before. But this reading also reveals the grave problem of such avant-gardism: here its confusion of art and life abets a conflation between symbolic transgression and mass murder. It is long past time to forego crypto-fascist ideas of sublimity.

**High-Rise:** In *Delirious New York* (1978), a “retrospective manifesto for Manhattan,” Rem Koolhaas published an old, tinted postcard of the city skyline from the early 1930s. It presents the Empire State, Chrysler, and other landmark buildings of the time with a visionary twist—a dirigible set to dock at the spire of the Empire State. It is an image of the twentieth-century city as a spectacle of new tourism, to be sure, but also as a utopia of new spaces—of people free to circulate from the street, through the tower, to the sky, and back down again. (The image is not strictly capitalist: the utopian conjunction of skyscraper and airship appears in revolutionary Russian designs of the 1920s as well.) The attack on the World Trade Center—the two jets flown into the two towers—was a dystopian perversion of this modernist dream of free movement through cosmopolitan space. Much damage was done to this great vision of the skyscraper city—and to New York as the capital of this old dream.

**Indiscipline:** Several of these notes circle around a single thesis: contemporary design is part of a greater revenge taken by advanced capitalism on postmodernist culture—a recouping of its crossings of arts and disciplines, a routinization of its transgressions. We know that autonomy, even semi-autonomy, is a fiction, but periodically this fiction is useful, even necessary, as it was at the high-modernist moment of Loos and company one hundred years ago. Periodically, too, it can become repressive, even deadening, as it was a few decades ago when late modernism
had petrified into medium-specificity and postmodernism promised an interdisciplinary opening. But this is no longer our situation. It is time to recapture a sense of the political situatedness of both autonomy and its transgression, a sense of the historical dialectic of disciplinarity and its contestation.

**Jewel Box:** No term is more important to modern architecture than “transparency.” For Siegfried Giedion this transparency was predicated on technologies such as steel and glass and ferro-concrete that allowed a thorough exposition of architectural space. For Lázlo Moholy-Nagy, it allowed architecture in turn to integrate the different transparencies of other mediums, such as photography and film. Less concerned with space than light, Moholy saw this integration as fundamental to the “new vision” of modernist culture in general. Yet this vision did not fare well after the war. In “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal” (1963), Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky devalued literal in favor of phenomenal transparency, in which “Cubist” surfaces “interpenetrate without optical destruction of each other.” This revaluation marked the moment when, once more, articulation of surface became as important as that of space, and the understanding of skin as important as that of structure. In other words, it marked the discursive advent of postmodern architecture in its two principal versions: first, architecture as a scenographic surface of symbols (as in pastiche postmodernism from Robert Venturi on) and, later, architecture as an autonomous transformation of forms (as in deconstructivist postmodernism from Peter Eisenman on). Today many prominent architects, such as Koolhaas, Herzog and de Meuron, and Richard Gluckman, do not fit neatly into either camp: they hold on to literal transparency even as they elaborate phenomenal transparency with projective skins and luminous scrims. Sometimes, however, these skins and scrims only dazzle or confuse, and the architecture becomes an illuminated sculpture, a radiant jewel. It can be beautiful, but it can also be spectacular in the negative sense used by Guy Debord—a kind of commodity-fetish on a grand scale, a mysterious object whose production is mystified.

**Kool House:** “This architecture relates to the forces of the Großstadt [the metropolis] like a surfer to the waves,” Koolhaas once remarked of the skyscrapers of Manhattan. With his recent interventions in the global city, the same might be said of his own architecture, and it might not sound like praise. What does it mean for an architect to surf the Großstadt today—to perfect its curve, to extend its trajectory? Even if an architect is empowered enough to make the attempt, can he or she do more than crash on the beach?

**Life Style:** In *Life Style* (2000), a compendium of his work, Canadian designer Bruce Mau asks us to think design as “life style” in the philosophical sense of the Greeks, Nietzsche, or Foucault, that is, as an ethics. But the style of *Life Style* is closer in spirit to Martha Stewart—a folding of the “examined life” into the “designed life.” Such style does not boost our “character,” as *Life Style* claims;
rather, it aids the contemporary conflation of the realization of self with the consumption of identity.

**Mediation**: “Mediation” used to mean the critical attempt to think the totality of the social world beyond its fragmentation and disconnection. Now it tends to refer to a social world given over to electronic media—and to an economic world retooled around digitizing and computing. In this mediation, the commodity is no longer an object to be produced so much as a datum to be manipulated—designed and redesigned, consumed and reconsumed. This is another reason why design is inflated today, to the point where it is no longer a secondary industry. Perhaps we should speak of a “political economy of design.”

**Nobrow**: One aspect of this mediated world is a merging of culture and marketing. For some commentators this has effected a new kind of “nobrow” culture in which the old distinctions of highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow no longer apply. For fans of this development “nobrow” is not a dumbing down of intellectual culture so much as a wising up to commercial culture, which becomes a source of status in its own right. Today, this argument runs, we are all in the same “megastore,” only in different aisles, and that is a good thing—that is democracy. Yet this is a conflation of democracy with consumption, a conflation that underwrites the principal commodity on sale in this marketplace: the fantasy that class divisions are thereby resolved. This fantasy is the contemporary complement to the foundational myth of the United States: that such divisions never existed here in the first place. This delusion allows millions of Americans to vote against their class interests at least every four years.

**Outmoded**: “The older media, not designed for mass production, take on a new timeliness: that of exemption and of improvisation. They alone could outflank the united front of trusts and technology.” So writes Theodor Adorno in *Minima Moralia* (1951) on the critical use of outmoded media in a capitalist context of ceaseless obsolescence. Here, of course, Adorno draws on Walter Benjamin, for whom “the outmoded” was a central concern. “Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie,” Benjamin wrote in his *Arcades Project*. “But only Surrealism exposed them to view. The development of the forces of production reduced the wish symbols of the previous century to rubble even before the monuments representing them had crumbled.” The “wish symbols” in question are the capitalist wonders of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie at the height of its confidence, such as “the arcades and interiors, the exhibitions and panoramas.” These structures fascinated the Surrealists nearly a century later—when further capitalistic development had turned them into “residues of a dream world” or, again, “rubble even before the monuments which represented them had crumbled.” For the Surrealists to haunt these outmoded spaces, according to Benjamin, was to tap “the revolutionary energies” that were trapped there. But it is less utopian to
say simply that the Surrealists registered the mnemonic signals encrypted in these structures—signals that might not otherwise have reached the present. This deployment of the outmoded can query the totalist assumptions of capitalist culture, and its claim to be timeless; it can also remind this culture of its own wish symbols, and its own forfeited dreams of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Can this mnemonic dimension of the outmoded still be mined today, or is the outmoded now outmoded too—another device of fashion?

**Post-Fordism:** The object world of modern cities was born of a Fordist economy that was relatively fixed: factories and warehouses, skyscrapers and bridges, railways and highways. However, as our economy has become more post-Fordist, capital has flowed ever more rapidly in search of cheap labor, innovative manufacture, financial deregulation, and new markets; and the life expectancy of many buildings has fallen dramatically. (Many cities are now hybrids of the two economies, with Fordist structures often retrofitted to post-Fordist needs.) This process is pronounced in the United States, of course, but it is rapacious where development is even less restricted. “His task is truly impossible,” Koolhaas writes of the architect in this condition, “to express increasing turbulence in a stable medium.” In a post-Fordist context, what can the criteria of architecture be?

**Quarantine:** For Koolhaas, the skyscraper is the crux of the “culture of congestion” of the old Manhattan, and he sees it as a mating of two emblematic forms—“the needle” and “the globe.” The needle grabs “attention,” while the globe promises “receptivity,” and “the history of Manhattanism is a dialectic between these two forms.” Since September 11 the discursive frame of this Manhattanism has shifted. New fears cling to the skyscraper as a terrorist target, and the values of “attention” and “receptivity” are rendered suspicious. The same holds for the values of congestion and “delirious space”; they are overshadowed by calls for surveillance and “defensible space.” In short, the “urbanistic ego” and cultural diversity that Koolhaas celebrates in *Delirious New York* are under enormous pressure. They need advocates like never before; for, to paraphrase the Surrealists, New York Beauty will be delirious or will not be.

**Running-Room:** As much as interdisciplinarity is crucial to cultural practice, so too are distinctions, as Karl Kraus insisted in 1912: “Adolf Loos and I—he literally and I linguistically—have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with running-room [Spielraum]. The others, the positive ones [i.e., those who fail to make this distinction], are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn.” “Those who use the urn as a chamber pot” were Art Nouveau designers who wanted to infuse art (the urn) into the utilitarian object (the chamber pot). Those who did the reverse were functionalist modernists who wanted to elevate the utilitarian object
into art. For Kraus the two mistakes were symmetrical—both confused use-value and art-value—and both risked a regressive indistinction: they failed to safeguard “the running-room” necessary to liberal subjectivity and culture. Note that nothing is said about a natural “essence” of art, or an absolute “autonomy” of culture; the stake is simply one of “distinctions” and “running-room,” of proposed differences and provisional spaces.

Spectacle: Clearly architecture has a new centrality in cultural discourse. Although this centrality stems from the initial debates about postmodernism in the 1970s, which were focused on architecture, it is clinched by the contemporary inflation of design and display in all sorts of spheres—art, fashion, business, and so on. Moreover, to make a big splash in the global pond of spectacle culture today, one has to have a big rock to drop, maybe as big as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao; and here architects like Gehry have an obvious advantage over artists in other media. In The Society of the Spectacle (1967), Debord defined spectacle as “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes an image.” With Gehry and company the reverse is now true as well: spectacle is “an image accumulated to the point where it becomes capital.” Such is the logic of many cultural centers today, as they are designed, alongside theme parks and sports complexes, to assist in the corporate “revival” of the city—that is, in its being made safe for shopping, spectating, and spacing out. This is the “Bilbao-Effect.”

Tectonics: For all the futurism of the computer-assisted designs of architects like Gehry, his structures are often akin to the Statue of Liberty, with a separate skin hung over a hidden armature, and with exterior surfaces that rarely match up with interior spaces. With the putative passing of the industrial age, the structural transparency of modern architecture was declared outmoded, and now the Pop aesthetic of postmodern architecture looks dated as well. The search for the architecture of the computer age is on; ironically, however, it has led Gehry and followers to nineteenth-century sculpture as a model, at least in part. The disconnection between skin and structure represented by this academic model has two problematic effects. First, it can lead to strained spaces that are mistaken for a new kind of architectural sublime. Second, it can abet a further disconnection between building and site. I am not pleading for a return to structural transparency; I am simply cautioning against a new Potemkin architecture of conjured surfaces driven by computer design.

Unabombers: From the handler of the terrorist in The Secret Agent (1907), by Joseph Conrad: “Pay attention to what I say. The fetish of today is neither royalty nor religion. Therefore the palace and the church should be left alone. . . . A murderous attempt on a restaurant or a theatre would suffer . . . from the suggestion of a nonpolitical passion. . . . Of course there is art. A bomb in the National Gallery would make some noise. But it would not be serious enough. Art has never
been their fetish. . . . But there is learning—science. Any imbecile that has got an income believes in that. He does not know why, but he believes it matters somehow. It is the sacrosanct fetish. . . . The whole civilized world has heard of Greenwich. . . . Yes, the blowing up of the first meridian is bound to raise a howl of execration.” The terrorists of September 11 picked out our “fetishes of today” with precision: the architectures of “finance” and “defense.”

**Vernacular**: Postmodern architecture pretended to revive vernacular forms, but for the most part it replaced them with commercial signs, and Pop images became as important as articulated space. In our design world, this development has reached a new level: now commodity-image and space are often melded through design. Designers strive for programs “in which brand identity, signage systems, interiors, and architecture would be totally integrated” (Bruce Mau). This integration depends on a deterritorializing of both image and space, which depends in turn on a digitizing of the photograph, its loosening from old referential ties, and on a computing of architecture, its loosening from old tectonic principles. As Deleuze and Guattari (let alone Marx) taught us long ago, this deterritorializing is the path of capital, not the avant-garde.

**Without Qualities**: Design is all about desire, but today this desire seems almost subject-less, or at least almost lack-less: design seems to advance a kind of narcissism that is all image and no interiority—an apotheosis of the subject that may be one with its disappearance. In our neo–Art Nouveau world of total design and Internet plenitude, the fate of “the poor little rich man” of Loos, “precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring,” is on the verge of realization. Robert Musil, a Loos contemporary, also seemed to anticipate this Style 2000 from the perspective of Style 1900. “A world of qualities without man has arisen,” Musil wrote in _The Man Without Qualities_ (1930–43), “of experiences without the person who experiences them, and it almost looks as though ideally private experience is a thing of the past, and that the friendly burden of personal responsibility is to dissolve into a system of formulas of possible meanings. Probably the dissolution of the anthropocentric point of view, which for such a long time considered man to be at the center of the universe but which has been fading for centuries, has finally arrived at the ‘I’ itself.”

**Xed**: Two theoretical models structured critical studies of postwar art above all others: the oppositional logic of the “post-,” of an interdisciplinary postmodernism opposed to a medium-specific modernism, and the recursive strategy of the “neo-,” of a postwar neo-avant-garde that recovered the devices of the prewar avant-garde (e.g., the monochrome, the readymade, the collage). Today, however, these models are played out; neither suffices as a strong paradigm for practice, and no other model stands in their stead. For many this double demise is a good thing: it permits artistic diversity; “weak” theory is better than strong; and so on. But our
paradigm-of-no-paradigm can also abet a stagnant incommensurability or a flat indifference, and this posthistorical default of contemporary art and architecture is no improvement on the old teleological projections of modernist practices. All of us (artists, critics, curators, amateurs) need some narrative to focus our practices—situated stories, not grands récits. Without this guide we are likely to remain swamped in the double wake of post/modernism and the neo/avant-garde.

**Yahoos:** . . .

**Zebras:** In American football the referees who wear striped shirts are derided as “zebras,” but the game is difficult to play without them. Critics once had a similar status in the sports of art and architecture, but more and more often they are banished from the field. Over the last two decades a nexus of curators and collectors, dealers and clients has displaced the critic; for these managers of art and architecture critical evaluation, let alone theoretical analysis, is of no use. They deem the critic an obstruction, and actively shun him or her, as do many artists and architects. In this void returns the poet-critic who waxes on about Beauty as the moral subject of art and architecture, with Sensation held over as a fun sideshow, or who combines the two in a pop-libertarian aesthetic perfect for market rule. This development needs to be challenged, if it is not too late, and “running-room” secured wherever it can be found or made.