Notes towards a Theory of Contestational Architecture

Sabin BORȘ, *Curator, Ph.D student,*
"Babeş-Bolyai" University Cluj-Napoca
sabin.bors@gmail.com
Dragoş DASCĂLU, Architect, Ph.D student,
Technical University of Cluj-Napoca
sddascalu@yahoo.com

Abstract

With very few exceptions since Ancient Greece, architecture has ignored for most of its history, its relation to power and politics, focusing instead on different ideals of beauty, perfection and purity of forms. It is no surprise then that architecture was used for political purposes mainly by people who are not architects, like Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, N.A. Miliutyn, to name just a few. Architecture is, and always was, linked to power, power holders, and to the idea of organizing the lives of groups or individuals. In the recent years, when the economic crisis hit stronger the residential sector and other real estate developments, the architects' role in the perpetuation of the established economic and political system has been put to scrutiny. Critics argue that architecture and architects lost their social role, or even more radically, that it can be considered an accomplice of power holders in the perpetuation of the current system. Critical architectural practices, based on the philosophy of conflict and the rejection of the idea of consensus, challenge the existing power structures and have gained in the recent years more and more ground both inside the profession and outside. But these practices are marginal more often than not, with a very limited impact, because however idealistic and well intentioned these practices are, architecture is still dependent on capital. How can architects produce spaces which are less about the power holders which finance and/or own them and more about the users? How can contestational architectures create anticipative geographies without remaining marginal?

Keywords: *Architecture, Consensus, Philosophy of Conflict, Urban Tactics, Contestational Strategies.*

I. Politics – conflict – consensus

It is not architecture as such that is at stake here, but the ways it comes to establish a set of social and functional urban relations. As architecture is the arrangement and distribution of relations in space, it holds the authority to regulate

these distributions in order to create social nodes around which the entire urban dynamics is set. Constructions are not just arrangements of form and functions. The city has become a simultaneous landscape of co-existence where morphological principles replace the framework of classical dichotomies and urban strategies replace compositional formulations. But with architecture becoming strategy and interest, the architect's role is increasingly political in that the architect traces life spaces, draws crossing lines, and creates events around the places one must describe. Architectural constructions are not restricted to bilateral (private client ↔ architect) or trilateral relation (institutional/economical client ↔ architect ↔ public), and should not be considered as an ideological practice of synthetic refusal of the data architecture must operate with. As capital is used for the benefits of colonial initiatives provided by the current ideology of separation, ideological contradictions are all the more so difficult to reconcile. *The political task of architecture is to surpass the conflict of today's political representations.*

*Architectural action is political action***.** Defining politics in the broadest sense as the practice and theory of organizing the action of a group of individuals, and architecture as the practice of organizing spaces for the action of individuals, the link between the two is obvious. In Ancient Greece, for example, *polis* was both the physical space of the city and its political organization. This link however, has rarely been acknowledged, as Cohen argues, or when it was acknowledged, it was exaggerated as a "paranoid version of an architecture rigidly determined by politics."[1] Even at one of the heights of the political involvement of architects, the link between the two was not explicit. During the 20s and 30s, urbanism and architecture were seen as the science of organizing all the functions of collective life, extending from the urban agglomerations to the rural environments.[2] The idea was that by means of scientifically planned spaces the everyday lives of individuals can be improved. Without expressing these goals explicitly as their political agenda, the actions themselves can be described as political. However, during the same sessions of the CIAM[3] where new spatial configurations for the better organization of individual actions were conceived and discussed, Le Corbusier stated that: "we are not dealing with politics and sociology here (…) I

---

[1] Jean Louis Cohen, "Scholarship or Politics? Architectural History and the Risk of Autonomy," *Journal of the Society of American Historians* 67, (3) (2008): 325-329.
[2] Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism*, *1928 – 1960* (Cambridge, London: MIT press, 2000), 25.
[3] Congres International d'Architecture Moderne.

repeat it to you, we have to stay architects and urbanists here."[4] And here is *the paradox in which architecture has created its objects – thinking that although their actions have as final goal the organization of the lives of individuals* (sometimes even in a deterministic fashion), *the actions in themselves are not political*.

Today, there are two different traditions at work when it comes to understanding politics and democracy and both these traditions have a counterpart in architectural practices. The liberal tradition is based on the respect and rule of law, on rationality, and consensus as an achievable goal. Consensus can be reached, as Habermas or Rawles have stated, through building rational norms with universal validity through the use of language. Habermasian thought is based on the idea that language can be used in order to achieve a mutual understanding, in an ideal speech situation. In this process, the interests and preferences of individuals, but also their passions, are repressed in favor of a rational purpose and rationality: "Their central aim is that it is possible thanks to adequate procedures of deliberation, to reach forms of agreement that would satisfy both rationality (understood as defense of liberal rights) and democratic legitimacy (as represented by popular sovereignty)."[5] In Corbusier's famous saying: "Architecture or Revolution. Revolution can be avoided,"[6] the architect didn't think that revolution was not necessary, but that through the rules established by the design he created, a perfect functional system would appear, in which all tensions between individuals are alleviated. Consensus is achieved. In general, for modernist architects, the rationality of design was based on universal basic rules, such as geometrical and functional relations which should be accepted as norms and the basis of discussion.

The democratic tradition is based on the ideas of equality, identity between governors and the governed, with a relationship of articulation and contamination between them.[7] It is not the intention of this text to reiterate the concepts of Marxism and neo-Marxism. What is of particular importance to the relation between architecture and politics is that in this line of political thought, consensus is not only undesirable, but also impossible. Politics is based on conflict. For Ranciere, consensus is the death of politics, making it the exclusive domain of the state. His argument resides in the dialectic between politics and police. Through

---

[4] *Apud* Claudio Secci, "Réceptions et appropriations des sciences humaines par les architectes. Les cas des CIAM et du Team Ten (1928-1962)," *Espace et Societes* 142 (2010), 20.

[5] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London, New York: Verso, 2000), 83.

[6] Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1986 [1923]), 283.

[7] Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.

police, Ranciere understands the natural order of things, the symbolic constitution of the social, meaning the perpetuation of groups defined by wealth, interests, nationality, etc.: "society here is made of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this matching of functions, places and ways of being, there is no place for any void. It is this exclusion of what `is not` that constitutes the police principle at the core of statist practices."[8] The political, on the other hand, is born out of the conflict with the natural order, with the police and it is always temporary, precarious. Its essence is *dissensus,* the division inserted in `common sense` by creating a dispute, a conflict over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given.[9] Consensus, therefore is either an annulment of dissensus, and the transformation of politics into the police, as argued by Ranciere, or, as Mouffe (2000) argues, if realized it leads to the perpetuation of existing power relations and the annulment of any the agency of individuals to change society when the system fails. In this democratic tradition of politics and democracy, based on the Marxist tradition, conflict is the centerpiece, arguing that only through keeping antagonism, a critic of the *status-quo* is possible, and thus real change is possible.

Architectural processes, or at least those which concern and affect a larger population, have passed from their instrumental logic and the cold facts of rationalism to the idea of gaining the support of people, thus making their appropriation easier. Here is where the two traditions of political thought have a direct impact on the way architecture is conceived and presented to its potential users. The majority of architectural processes today are based on the idea of consensus, or at least, the limitation of any potential conflict. Consensus building today in spatial matters is even required by law in some countries such as the UK or France. The idea of some rationality at the basis of conceiving space and thus the possibility of consensus in what concerns issues related to space is the meeting place of both architects and clients of buildings, in general power holders (be they economic or political agents). As architect Cristopher Day argues, for building design, the idea of arguing about issues related to architecture is inacceptable because it lacks efficiency and it leads to compromises in building design which is not a desirable goal. As in the Habermasian line of thought, Day argues for participation by all relevant individuals in the discussion as long as they "step back

---

[8] Jaques Ranciere, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* (London, New York: Continuum, 2010), 36.
[9] Ranciere, *Dissensus*, 69.

from the ideas, opinions and strong feelings most people start with (…) their premature form, personalized viewpoints and associations obstruct any coming together. If they're expressed at the wrong time, they easily obstruct agreement, if not lead to argument."[10]

Compromise and consensus building are powerfully criticized through the democratic tradition of political thought because of the inescapable relation to power and domination. Architecture must balance the disequilibria between the various constructions it tries to articulate; in doing so, compromise is not wide of stereotypes, clichés or preconceptions. As urbanism sets rules of fragmentation and subdivision between nodes, centers and peripheries, compromise is often an attempt to bridge rights and deeds, values and behaviors, rules and aspirations. It is a question of how does one reach the appropriate convention meant to ensure the structural stability of forms and the ability to accommodate the spatial frames created within our habitus. In fact, compromise is a key element within the structure of the symbolic space drawn by the specific practices that articulate the distribution of cultural capital to class habits and spaces. It regulates the politics of desire and the politics of anticipation equally, the relation between conventions and exclusions, and the transformation of social realities and collective representations. Therefore, compromise is already a constituent part of hegemony. As long as it is assimilated to hegemonic structures and used as a production instrument of holistic entities, compromise coming from the social might not be real and the replacement of political systems might only be an adaptation to new types of order through a basic process of transferring influence from one source of power to the other.

Consensus building leads to similar outcomes. In fact, through the actions of the power-holders involved (choosing the place of debate, the tools of debate, the rules, etc.), consensus becomes pragmatic consensus. Richardson and Connely argue that consensus based on the Habermasian ideal speech act and ideal argumentation leads in reality to a form of pragmatic consensus in which central issues or important issues can be strategically avoided. Although they agree that it is still a step forward from the instrumental logic of rationalist based design which tends to exclude the values of individuals and their rationality, replacing them with the rationality of the experts, the process is still flawed because: power cannot be ignored in deliberative processes; it neglects the multiple strategies which

---

[10] Christopher Day, *Consensus Design. Socially inclusive process* (Oxford, Amsterdam, Boston, London, New York, Paris, San Diego, San Francisco, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo: Architectural Press, 2003).

influence the modelling of planning politics; it is not concerned with empowering individuals (or rather it considers every individual capable of exerting their own opinion, which is rarely the case). Pragmatic consensus is achieved either by eliminating certain difficult persons, through well targeted invitations or relying solely on the idea of representation, which raises the issue of legitimacy. As many individuals do not actually take part in decision making meetings, however democratic and open consensus building is intended to be, it always becomes restricted or exclusive. Pragmatic consensus can also be achieved through an exclusion of issues, being based on problems in which understanding is easier but which might not be the most important. Or through an exclusion of outcomes, in which the process is not directed towards delivering meaningful outcomes but towards a lowest common denominator which makes consensual agreement easier.[11] As Maxence Bohn, from the architectural studio "collectif etc." has argued: "In France we use this word «participative» a lot. It's very bad because for big projects there are politicians who say that they did a participative project because they asked people to choose between pink and blue for the color of the façade."[12] The main criticism brought to consensus building is, therefore, that it does not bring any sort of relevant change in the current system of the production of architecture. However, critical practices are still quite marginal in architectural production. Because they operate within the same context of economics, politics and culture, *architectural practices need to retrieve an agency that lies in investigative or experimental approaches* that could possess their own kind of power.

II. Contestational architecture

Ever since the 60s and especially after May 68, the philosophical change of paradigm to post-structuralism had a powerful impact on architectural practices. Participatory practices, do-it-yourself, squatter movements, tactical appropriations of cities, guerrilla architecture have appeared and have criticized the established ways of architectural production. Manifests and writings sprung up, such as *Non-Plan*,[13] *Housing: An Anarchist Approach*,[14] or the manifestos of Team X members

---

[11] Tim Richardson, Stephen Connely, "Reinventing public participation: Planning in the Age of Consensus," in *Architecture and participation*, eds. Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu, Jeremy Till (Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 77-104.

[12] Maxence Bohn at the Architecture Days debate "Crossing borders for the common good", Cluj-Napoca, 16th May 2013, [transcript online on: http://arhiforum.ro/agora/crossing-borders-common-good].

[13] Non-plan: An Experiment in Freedom is the 1969 manifest of Reyner Banham, Paul Barker, Peter Hall and Cedric Price, arguing for a renouncement of all planning regulations.

such as Giancarlo de Carlo or Alison and Peter Smithson. Although these were highly praised at the time, even by members of the profession, the effects they produced were minimal. Except for some notable examples (such as Lucian Kroll's *Maison Medicale* in Louvain or Ralph Erskine's *Byker Wall* in Newcastle upon Tyne), architectural production based on the democratic tradition and the philosophy of conflict remained quite marginal. Today, in the context of an economic crisis which massively hit the building sector, we are witnessing a new surge of architectural thinking based on the same democratic tradition and philosophy of conflict. They are based on the fact that the current system of architectural production is more and more limited to elites, excluding most individuals who do not "fit in". As Negri argues, the spaces produced today are controlled, captured and exploited by power holders, be they economic or political agents.[15] Again, just as during the 60s and early 70s, there is an extensive attention given to these practices. For example, The Venice Architecture Biennale in 2012, one of the most important architectural events, was considered one of the most political biennales in history,[16] showcasing a revival of participatory practices, squatter movements, "do-it-yourself" initiatives through an explicit political point of view. The Zumtobel Awards for Architectural Research or the European Prize for Public Space have recognized in the last years, these types of practices as well.[17]

It is not our intention make a thorough study of the recent revival of political involved architectural practices. However, most of these are based on the idea of conflict and a direct challenge towards the established system of architectural production. Even though there is a renewed attention towards critical practices, with projects being developed in almost every large city in Europe, they are marginal in comparison with the number of buildings created through the standard procedures. But contestational architecture based on the philosophy of conflict cannot be anything else but marginal. Architecture, as Sudjic argues, is about

---

[14] C. Ward, *Housing: an anarchist approach* (London: Freedom Press, 1976).

[15] Antonio Negri, Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu Petrescu, Anne Querrien, *What makes a biopolitical space?,* ([online] in Eurozine, www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-01-21-negri-en.html, 2007) [accesed 24.11.2011].

[16] As described by Vanessa Quirk in her editorial: *Venice Biennale 2012: The Most Political Biennale Yet [*online] http://www.archdaily.com/271897/ or Steve Rose for The Guardian in his editorial *Starchitects and Squatters: Venice Architecture Biennale* [online] http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/aug/29/venice-architecture-biennale.

[17] A Special Category Award was given by the European Prize for Public Space to the "*Acampada en la Puerta del Sol"* intervention in Madrid in 2011, a large-scale demonstration by citizens which supposed the temporary occupation of the Puerta del Sol public space in Madrid.

power, as it depends on capital.[18] Contestational architecture, because it fights tactically against the established system has no capacity to access power, or rather it refuses the idea of power. That leads us to an apparent paradox: contestational architectures try to change the world and the current system of architectural production but they can never access the power needed to do that, because of the very way they are conceived.

Contestational architecture could partly be seen as a pragmatopic practice. In describing the idea of "pragmatopia", Andreas Ruby claims that while it is situated "in the no man's land of the modernist dialectics between utopia and pragmatism, pragmatopia suggests an alternative territory of architectural operation. Thus it resists the escapism of the utopian which imprisons its vision in a *no-place*. At the same time, it bypasses the automatism of the pragmatic with its tendency to kill the idea for the sake of sheer action. Pragmatopia instead rolls out a new plane of events in order to enable action (*pragma*) to take place (*topos*)."[19] The question we need to ask ourselves is what place do we actually occupy through our actions? What sort of space can contestational architectures generate? In his article "The Functional Site", James Meyer (2000) distinguishes between a literal and a functional site. The literal site is the singular place occupied by a construction; it carries along conformity and compromise for, in a literal site, a construction can only be understood in its relation to the actuality of the place itself. By contrast, the functional site exceeds the physical constraints and constitutes itself as pure process or transformation describing the "mapping of institutional and textual filiations" traced by a space.[20] This distinction could be added up to Michel de Certeau's distinction between "place" and "location": "A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (*place*). […] A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time variables. Thus, the space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the

---

[18] Deyan Sudjic**,** *The Edifice Complex. The Architecture of Power* (London: Penguin Books, 2011, [2005]).

[19] Andreas Ruby, "pragmatopia," in *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture. City, Technology and Society in the Information Age, eds.* Manuel Gausa, Vicente Guallart, Willy Muller et al. (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2003), 488.

[20] James Mayer, "The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity," in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 24-25.

operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. […] In short, space is a practiced place."[21] It is this "polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities" that is essential to our discussion. It is a synthetic formula for the way architecture negotiates its own insertion into reality, its own *realization*. It also describes the critical action through which a place transforms, performs and makes a space effective.

In contestation we see that architecture faces a triple shift:[22] a *cultural* shift that would reclaim the knowledge of the historical city in the service of immediate action; an *imaginal* shift that would enable architecture to separate from the media codes of society and propose not only a new architectural language, but the emergence of a mobile practices to activate the city; and a *functional* shift encompassing spaces that are compatible with today's social dynamics. What is the discursive and practical turn of architecture that would enable its morphological variations to lay down the program of a new field of architectural contingency? How can we develop active alternatives for the contemporary city beyond its historical narrative? How can architecture interfere with the territoriality of historical representations in order to reclaim an-historical meanings and dispositions that are adherent to the present? Willy Müller introduces the concept of "adherence" as an answer to this, referring to occupation tactics meant to de-territorialize the territoriality of historical representations and enact an essential mutation of meaning that would bring "into crisis the model that sustains it."[23] Therefore, in order to surpass its representational limitations, architecture must perform the space of its constructions. It must not be the accomplice of its formal and historical functions or representations, but the accomplice of today's practical conditions, producing meaningful interaction, the empathy of forms and the locality of architectural contingent fields. It should produce situations and conditions instead of plan; locality and geography instead of spatial territorialities; the performance of space as infiltration and engagement instead of its bare production. It is no longer the reality of a context architects should describe in their projects, but the divergent realities of specific conditions and situations reclaiming the locality of habitation. Architectural adherence must accommodate

---

[21] Michel De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien 1.arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990 [1980]), 117-118.
[22] This idea is presented at large in Sabin Borş, "Architectural Inheritances and An-Historical Adherences," *Igloo magazine*, no. 130 (October 2012), 66-69.
[23] Willy Müller, "Adherence," in *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture. City, Technology and Society in the Information Age*, eds. Manuel Gausa, Vicente Guallart, Willy Muller et al. (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2003), 33.

structural tactical actions and evolutionary systems of engagement into contemporary urban dynamics. It must engage the temporal potential of structures in the performance and restructuring of conditional possibilities. *The conflict of architecture is the conflict between habitation spaces and living spaces.*

III. Contestational architecture – shifting between the tactical and the strategic

The last few years have shown us through some notable examples the idea of contestational architecture and the possibility of answering its apparent paradox. One of them is Torre David in Caracas, Venezuela, which refers to how contestation as practice takes over a strategically planned building. The second, Open Air Library by KARO Architekten and Architektur-Netzwerk in Madgenburg, Germany refers to the way a tactical, contestational intervention becomes strategic through the empowerment and the further involvement of citizens.

Torre David is a 45-story skyscraper in Caracas that remained uncompleted since the 1994 collapse of the Venezuelan economy. While the government took control of the building after the banking crisis in 1994, this "accidental monument" has been left half-built, as no strategy or investment plan has been made that could raise enough capital to finish the building. With no elevators, electricity, running water or balcony railing, the building became the improvised home of more than 750 families who moved inside the building starting October 2007. This communal housing project, that some call a "vertical slum", has since been the subject of political controversy, as the tower was originally part of an urban renewal plan to privatize and modernize Caracas's business district. But inhabitants have managed to build a vibrant community inside an extra-legal squat, managing a series of operations into a micro-economy within the building. Occupants have adapted the building's interior, creating enclosures to house rooms and working places that suit their own needs. They've wired the tower with electricity and have managed to install a plumbing system. In the absence of a formal infrastructure, residents have organized themselves and formed a cooperative to collect dues and manage the space.

Torre David is a clear evidence of the perils and failures of inadequate urban social programs, but it is also a proof of the collective's will to transform this derelict building into a vertical community where people could build new lives for themselves and organize life according to their own needs. It is an example of how people adapt to conditions and have the power to transform spaces that were

formerly part of a political and economic strategy, into informal settlements of social experimentation. A contestational practice such as this could be a sign that architecture will be increasingly challenged to adapt to similar calls for action, with the goal of putting architecture and design in service to equitable social practices. Torre David's spontaneous organic occupation is, indeed, a model of "good practice" acknowledged by architects throughout the world. Yet its presence in media and at professional events is a proof of this project's ambiguous state of affairs. On the one hand, this project was made possible precisely by the fact that the building was left unfinished, undisputed, and unclaimed by local authorities or power-holders. On the other hand, it shows that informal structures can rise from the actions of various kinds of "subcultures" and be recognized in various sectors of society, including management and economics, as having a real capacity to operate from the ground up. On a larger scale, Torre Davis is a proof of the possibility to shift multiculturalist principles of governmental politics into the civic action; here, the globalization of market economy and the generation of poly-centralized capital turns into a globalization of the critical action, in support of micro-societies. The failure of civic society as determined by the power-holders brings into question the problem of commons. While the standard arguments for eliminating the idea of commons is to say that common or shared property is an inefficient way to manage resources, any claim that efficiency is a totalizing good is an example of the particular values of the powerful being represented and internalized as universal. People living inside Torre David are challenging the very syntax of "property lines" and community, generating an active form of sabotage and subversion of the power-holders' strategic planning based on property, real estate and capital. Waste urban entities such as Torre David reveal a social and collective reflex the unexisting aims of which could constitute an alternative politics and nomadic capital. The squatting activity is less important, in this case, than the idea that a peripheral collective mass could consolidate rightful social and urban marks.

In 2005, KARO Architekten initiated a project called City in Trial aimed at reinforcing the social networks in Magdenburg's Salbke District. Magdenburg, and this specific district in particular, have been hit hard by the process of deindustrialization during the 80s and 90s. Generally, in these situations of physical and social decadence of a neighborhood or city, there are two standard answers in the minds of power-holders: building a new architectural icon in the idea of regenerating the area through tourism (the now famous Bilbao effect); or abandoning it completely and ignoring investing in that area in particular. KARO

and their local partners Arhitektur Netzwerk challenged the standard ways of dealing with these types of neighborhoods. They organized a two weeks workshop with local associations and residents in which it was decided that what the neighborhood needed was a library, as a reminder of the old library which burned down in the late 80s. Instead of focusing on designing a new library, an icon for the neighborhood, as it happened in the UK, with such libraries as the Peckham Library by starchitect William Alsop, or the Canada Water Library, both representations of the care of local authorities for its people and glorifying the architectural object and their architects, KARO and Arhitektur-Netzwerk proposed an entirely new type of process, a direct contestation of the current practice. Instead of relying on power holders, it relied on individuals and their organizations. Instead of relying on the ingenuity of the architects and their instrumental logic, or the power of architectural icons, it relies on the creativity of individuals. At the end of the two week workshop, residents and architects alike built a real life model of what they decided together the building should look like, out of beer crates supplied by a local brewery. Alongside this 1:1 model, books were collected from the residents and thus an Open Air Library was both created and tested at the same time. So far, this looks as any other participatory project, and thus it might be considered marginal. However, after this participatory work, Arhitektur-Netzwerk with the local associations Fermersleben Salbke and Westerhusen eV, continued the work initiated then, by collecting books and opening a community library nearby the Open Library site. This community library was the debate place which attracted the attention of authorities and in which a proposal for a permanent library was created through the help of both the architects and the citizens. In 2009, a permanent Open Air Library was inaugurated, with the same form and function as the one created four years earlier. Its image now, in comparison with the beer crate intervention from which it started, has high design qualities, putting it alongside mainstream architectural objects. And here lies our interest in the context of our previously stated paradox.

The Open Air Library in Magdenburg is put alongside mainstream architecture worldwide. In 2010 it won the European Prize for Public Space, being a joint winner alongside the Oslo Opera House. A contestational architectural project was considered equal with a state driven, strategic, iconic, mainstream architectural object. Whereas in the case of the Opera House, the objectives, surface and budget of the project were determined by the State, who, in the end it represents, in the case of the Open Air Library power-holders, meaning the local authorities, which financed the endeavor, played only a marginal role with little

influence over the process. Querrien argues that when authorities try to create a permanent situation, meaning transforming a tactical intervention into a strategic intervention, this is done by imposing the rules of the State or of the power-holder upon the intervention. Thus the contestational character is replaced.[24] The Open Air library, however is currently managed and owned by the local residents associations, thus keeping a permanent reminder of the process which created it. This is why it represents an answer to our apparent paradox, because it is a tactical intervention which became strategic without losing its contestational character.

The two architectural spaces are not a synthesis to the consensus – conflict dialectic, or even more, to the liberal – democratic dialectic. What the two projects manage is to show the possibility of a shift between the strategic (an attribute of power-holders) and the tactic (an attribute of those dominated). However, both acknowledge conflict but neither of them engage in it, nor do they avoid it. What these two architectural spaces manage is to be conflictual and non-conflictual at the same time. Here lies their example: *creating an ambiguity between formal-informal, strategic-tactic, conflict-consensus.*

In the case of Torre David, the space is not occupied and refunctionalized informally as a conflict with the power holders who built it. The building was not chosen for any specific reason, such as representing the system which built it, representing specific power-holders, or as a fight against capitalism, liberal democracy or consensus. The building was chosen because it was available. The idea is that the informal and the tactical should not be opposed to the strategic, in permanent conflict, rather than the tactic builds upon the strategic, leaving subversion as implicit meaning of their actions. In a study of informal practices which create the city of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Valerie Clerc shows that the *favelas*, *bidonvilles*, etc. are a reverse of urban politics, but are created by those politics in the first place. The strategic orients the configuration of the tactic and participates through their dispositif in their creation. The evolution of informal buildings and urban regions depend on the evolution of the legislative system and urban regulations, because on the one hand they limit further the access to residence in the context of continuous urban growth, and, on the other, informal neighborhoods develop in those places where the regulations are inadequate and incite to their avoidance, not where the regulations and laws are very strict.[25] Thus direct conflict is always avoided. This is Michel de Certeau's understanding of

---

[24] Anne Querrien, "The exodus lives on the street corner," in *Urban Act*, ed. AAA and PEPRAV (Montrouge: Moutot Imprimeurs, 2007), 307-313.
[25] Valerie Clerc, "Du formel à l'informel dans la fabrique de la ville. Politiques foncières et marches immobiliers à Phnom Penh," *Espace et Sociétés,* 143 (2010), 63-79.

tactics and strategies. The tactics do not fight the strategic. Although opposed, tactics unconsciously subvert the strategic through the "thousand ways of poaching", going pass them, without abandoning them or fighting them directly. The formal and informal, the strategic and the tactical are impossible to separate in the creation and the appearance of the tactic. The formal, the strategic is not the thing *against* which the informal or the tactical appears. Rather, the strategic is a preexistent condition for the appearance of the tactic with which it interacts. An opposition without conflict.

Strategic uses define less the transformation of living spaces, and more the transformation of the living conditions they circumscribe. As political subjects, both the architect and the inhabitant are engaged in space arrangements and tactical living practices that turn them into active agents of space formation, who contribute to the activation of living spaces directly. Tactical uses engage the collective organism in processes of association, correspondence, and engagement. Yet the difference between strategy and tactics lies in the conceptual shift in the relation between design and decision. Contrary to strategic uses, tactical uses set the priority of decisions over design or, rather, *design as decision*. The continuous extension of cities involves the need to reconsider the demographic conditions, the socio-cultural and economico-political constraints of society, and the current organization of space. Architects must build inside already built environments – this alone calls for flexible habitation practices, the adaptability of spatial concentrations and dilatations, and the rethinking of political, institutional, and community criteria that articulate the critical limits of the city. The regularities of urban systems are turning into processes of occupation and re-appropriation; organization makes room for tactical positioning, and thus makes fluid the classical notion of composition. Inhabitants can interfere with their surrounding life space in order to operate decisions of habitation; on the other hand, they become the agents of architectures and nomadic practices that challenge mechanisms of spatial and existential articulation, generating dispositions of habitation. The relation between decision and disposition is fundamental. Dispositions of habitation bring changes in contemporary paradigms by proposing elastic orders that define individual variations and pluralities. They are meant to distribute spatial positions and condition decision-based logics that follow a flexible and reinformed way of interpreting information about the immediate living space. Decision does not fulfill a regulative role here, nor is it reduced to correlating structures and information – it gains an operative role that goes from a

predictable and measurable vision of the world, to a differential vision that encompasses the complex variations in the general syntax of space.[26]

Architecture is no longer a process of building or over-building the space. It becomes a practice of public utility. It must adapt to new habitation practices and in doing so, it needs to shift the accent from the critical architectural object to critical architectural action. We may consider the examples above as the possible emergence of an architecture of support and engagement into new urban politics, especially in the case of Torre David, where the inhabitant is the first agent, albeit unconscious, of eco-social transformation. The consequence of this idea is that *architecture might need to assume a geographical living condition,* where geography is not only an investigative research into reality – *it engages the production of research spaces* and transforms the environment into an active information agent. This also opens questions upon architecture itself as actant and engagement, challenging the regulative norms of efficiency, as it produces differences and transforms the living space continuously.

Tactical use is an adaptive practice. As urbanism replaces existing circulation systems with new and more "accessible" ones, that can be further normalized, this process has direct impact on architecture in that it can absorb the conditions of plurality and re-organize the regimes and spaces of collective memory by dismantling spatiality in favor of the production and assemblage of spaces, conventional or unconventional equally. It is this inner conflict too that threatens architecture and brings it closer to what Bill Millard once called a "passive urbicide", when buildings and infrastructure fall victims to gradual forces that are manifest in the very act of construction. While one can think of architectural techniques that could sabotage the orders, what is more interesting to imagine is the possibility of an architecture of opposition, an architecture which is not created through urban cartographies, but through a turning of formal, political, social, and technological considerations in order to unveil undistorted and affective intensities. It is what we could call a *diagenetic* architecture.[27] In its basic acceptance, diagenesis is the totality of chemical, mineralogical and structural transformations that sediments suffer when passing through the process of their consolidation and after they have lost connection to their formation environment. Could we, therefore, imagine an architecture that could lose its connection to the formation environment? Could we imagine an architecture that can break away

---

[26] See also Manuel Gausa's discussion of the term *dispositions* in *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture,* 174.

[27] The idea of *diagenetic architecture* is also discussed in Sabin Borş, "Architecture – Between Tactics and Diversion," *Arhitext magazine* no. 12 (December 2009), 72-79.

from its tactical alliance with the political and the economic, as pure diversion or social "manoeuvre" open to continuous deterritorialization and infiltration?

Lars Bang Larsen's idea of a society without qualities addresses the issue of reducing the way we think society to the matrices of state and capital. The author defines this society without qualities as "one in which a systemic pressure on cultural and democratic institutions results in a whittling down of civil liberties." While it is integrated into global networks of instrumentality through new information technologies, the society without qualities has the potential for becoming, as it is never manifest as such; it is a "precondition for a society to come." Making reference to Negri's *Empire*, Larsen brings into discussion the possible shift of modernization "towards the expropriation of the common and the dissolution of the concept of the public."[28] With money being the one thing that connects us and that we cannot have in common, it would be all too easy to think that in order to alter this situation, one could disturb financial networks and profit flows; yet it would be interesting to conceive a politics and an architecture of undoing. Could architecture build without an image of the building to come? Could it build without actually controlling or ordering space? Could it contest its own image and its own context?

IV. Disequilibriums and mutations – challenging the context

After acknowledging that the informal and the formal are not in direct conflict, the architect can help the appearance of the tactical inside the structure that should represent the power-holder. The philosophy of conflict, based on a democratic tradition in politics, argues that power holders try to control and order their space. A strategy, in de Certeau's terms is: "the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an «environment.» A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, «clienteles,» «targets,» or «objects» of research)."[29] The places of strategies have all their positions clearly determined. For each individual, group, action, function there is a specific place. Or, as Ranciere argued, the space of the power-holders is the police, where there is no

---

[28] Lars Bang Larsen, *The Society Without Qualities*, [online] on http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-society-without-qualities-2/ [accessed 3.11.2013].
[29] Michel De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien* vol 1. *Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, (1990) [1980]), XLVI.

place for any void, for anything that "is not".[30] The result of strategic thinking is therefore the over-determination of urban and architectural spaces.

Richard Sennett (2007) argues that the result of over-determination is the creation of the Brittle City, a closed system based on equilibrium and integration. Equilibrium means not favoring one objective in spite of others, but also that the extent of strategic thinking extends over all the territory. Integration meaning that every part of the system has a place in an overall design: "Things that do not fit are diminished in value (…) context (…) polite but potent word in repressing anything that does not fit in, ensuring that nothing sticks out, offends or challenges."[31] The Brittle City is the Police version of the city, but also a tool for ensuring consensus. What can be challenging or controversial in spatial occupation or use is eliminated, so that consensus is ensured. What is achieved is coherence of the urban realm and the visual readability of the city, ensuring that "20th century bureaucrat's horror of disorder" is not affected and a complete visual control of the territory is achieved. This comes however, at the cost of "mixed social and economic use (…) all leading to social exclusion in the name of visual order and pleasure."[32] The response to the over-determined Brittle City is The Open City: "the unexpected encounter, the chance discovery, the innovation in diverse spaces, dense, both public and private, spaces that do not fit together", whose planner must "champion dissonance."[33] The Open City admits conflict and dissonance and works with both. As the architectural studio aaa (atelier d'architecture autogeree) states in the description of their actions, when producing spaces, and public spaces in particular, one starts with identifying all the claims for it, starting from the very small to those of power-holders, transforming them into the project brief and less of a threat and more of an opportunity for a rich and meaningful project for all.[34] How is the Open City created? Through abandoning the idea of a goal, a terminus point for the interventions upon it. The Open City cannot rise from a general master plan. The master plan is the tool for the creation of the Brittle City because it has a very clear goal ahead, what is subject to change is the means to achieve

---

[30] Jacques Ranciere, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* (London, New York: Continuum, 2010), 36.
[31] Richard Sennet, "The Open City," in *The Endless City,* eds. Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic (London: Phaidon, 2007), 291.
[32] Richard Sennet, "Boundaries and Borders," in *Living in the Endless City,* eds. Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic (London: Phaidon, 2011), 329.
[33] Sennet, "The Open City," 292.
[34] Doina Petrescu, *How to make a community as well as the space for it* (2007) [online] on PEPRAV - Plate-forme Européenne de Pratiques et Recherches Alternatives de la Ville (http://www.peprav.net/tool/spip.php?article31, 2007) [accesed 24.11.2011].

that goal. This is not to say that, in contrast, actions for creating the Open City are done without an end in sight, rather that it focuses on multiple ends, updated after each action: "Rather than a lock-step march towards achieving a single end, we look at different and conflicting possibilities of each stage. Keeping these possibilities intact and leaving conflict in play opens up the design system."[35] Conflict is not the main issue of contestational architecture. Conflict is important only as long as it produces an evolution of the project, challenging the idea of equilibrium brought by the Brittle City. The Open City, the city of constant disequilibrium, uses conflict as a tool for challenging the permanency of situations.

In an article provocatively titled *«Give me a gun and I will make all buildings move» An ant's view of architecture*, Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva claim that the beauty and attraction to perspective, a cultural legacy that goes back to the Renaissance and is maintained in our ways of drawing and projecting, determines a way of thinking that separates architecture from the environment in which a building is being built, as well as from the actual living of that space. According to Latour and Yaneva, a building is a "disputed territory" that must reflect the movements taking place inside it, its dislocations and mutations, the accidents and transformations a space is subjected to. Centuries after the discovery of perspective and the invention of projective geometry, there is still no convincing way of drawing the controversial space a building encompasses. For the authors, a building should be imagined as a navigation through a controversial landscape of information, a series of animated projects the trajectories of which describe unstable definitions, valuations, and crossings. "Recalcitrant materials" and construction technologies generate a moving modulator that regulates the various intensities of engagement, concentrate the fluxes of actors and distribute them "so as to compose a productive force in space-time."[36] Here, architecture is mutation. It assumes a tectonic condition, following the space-time faults involved by moving into space. This is also a way to do away with the idea of "context" in its static and circumstantial understanding, replacing it with a dynamic view that unveils irregular movements, as well as physical reactions and manifestations. It is a position closely linked to the ideas expressed by Michelle Addington in her essay "*Architecture of Contingency*" (2010): architecture favors bi-dimensional surfaces, as a result of the *a priori* belief that perception originates and is determined by geometry. Addington argues that perception is given by the local and accidental

---

[35] Sennet, "The Open City," 296.
[36] Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva, "«Give me a gun and I will make all buildings move» An ant's view of architecture," in *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, Design, Research*, ed. Reto Geiser (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008), 80-89.

exchange between body and environment, for which the built surface is the function of circumstances and constructed contexts. Here, architecture is contingency; it is relation and happening, touch and exteriority, opposition and performance.[37] This idea of exteriority has, we would argue, less to do with *orientation* and space determination, a phenomenological view that remains partly rooted in the determinism of perspective, and more with *radiation*. Architecture is radiation. The body is the constituent of space, and architecture appears only through "tangible action". Context itself becomes radiation: it does not define the individual's relation to fields of perspective, but it is formed through architecture's formal objectivity in relation to the body as the articulating node of form. From construction, architecture becomes *emergence*.

Architecture should not create spaces that could be circumscribed to current semiotic paradigms. It must imagine geographies shaped as anticipations of participatory dynamics arising within collectives.[38] In doing so, architecture not only avoids the dialectical relation between the production of new spaces and the new forms of liberty and democracy,[39] but transforms the "urban landscape" into a spontaneous experience and interpretation, as a direct result of physical participation to the geography of a space. Habitation is slowly replaced by situation, describing continuous movements, rhythms, and displacements. What the idea of urban geography brings is the flexibilization of the inhabitants' positioning in relation to the spaces of a city, in order to generate new relations, permissions and accesses. In doing so, inhabitants influence the systems from the outside, in a wilding gesture of "emancipation" from what Sanford Kwinter calls the "behaviorally engineered urban spaces": "Wildness emerges in a system once we lose the ability to predict from the outside what it will do. […] Wilding became a new and terrifying word for urban drift; for ad hocism; for the collective, unstable phenomena of pack, mass and crowd; for the spontaneous emergence of epidemia and «stim»; perhaps most significantly, for the unruly and uncontrolled

---

[37] Michelle Addington, "Architecture of Contingency," in *Hylozoic Ground. Liminal Responsive Architecture: Philip Beesley,* eds. Permilla Ohrstedt, and Hayley Isaacs (Cambridge, ON: Riverside Architectural Press, 2010), 66-75.

[38] The following ideas are discussed at length in Sabin Borş, "Anticipative geographies and experimental archaeologies," in *The Would-Be City: In(ter)ventions in the post-communist urban space*, eds. Ina Stoian and Daniela Calciu (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2012), 264-271.

[39] Trevor Paglen, "Experimental Geography. From Cultural Production to the Production of Space," in *Experimental Geography. Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography and Urbanism*, ed. Nato Thompson (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2008), 30-33.

emancipation of self-organizing social forces from the rigid geometries of socially and behaviorally engineered urban spaces."[40]

The twinning of a geographical condition of architecture and these wilding self-organizing social forces gives birth to nettings of indiscipline. But it also contributes to consolidating vicinities as the common living spaces and locality of participation. In *The Production of Locality*, Arjun Appadurai (1996) states that:

> To make the link between *locality* as property of social life and neighborhoods as social forms requires a more careful exposition of the context issue. The production of neighborhoods is always historically grounded and thus contextual. That is, neighborhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighborhoods. […] Frequently, these contexts, against which neighborhoods are produced and figured, are at once seen as ecological, social, and cosmological terrains. […] The many displaced, deterritorialized and transient populations that constitute today's ethnoscape are engaged in the construction of locality, as emotional structure, often against erosion, dispersal and implosion of neighborhoods as coherent social forms.[41]

It is crucial that architecture reconstructs the context in which the disjunctions between territory, subjectiveness and social movement were operated, on the one hand, and the constant degradation of the relation between spatial and virtual vicinities, on the other hand. It must build by assuming the conjectural paradox where life situations arise, in order to reorient the critical discourse and to propose forms of participatory property, the locality of which can oppose the teleologies of society and the determinisms by which it has been built. The inhabitant is an agent whose ability to challenge the syntaxes of spaces that organize and order the multiple everyday economies determines new flows, rifting power lines and institutional access. This challenge is the political act opening the space to the social re-articulation of living spaces.

Bibliography:

1. Addington, M. "Architecture of Contingency." In *Hylozoic Ground. Liminal Responsive Architecture: Philip Beesley* (pp. 66-75), edited by Ohrstedt, P. and Isaacs, H. Cambridge, ON: Riverside Architectural Press, 2010.

---

[40] Sanford Kwinter, *Far from Equilibrium, Essays on Technology and Design Culture* (New York, Barcelona: ACTAR, 2008).

[41] Arjun Appadurai, "The Production of Locality," in *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 182-198.

2. Appadurai, A. "The Production of Locality." In *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Appadurai, A. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

3. De Certeau, M. *L'invention du quotidien 1.arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard, (1990) [1980].

4. Chasin, N. "Architecture from the Fabric of Life Itself. Team 10 and the pre-history of participatory urbanism." *Arhitektov bilten/Architect's bulletin* 188/189 (2011): 67– 69.

5. Clerc, V. "Du formel à l'informel dans la fabrique de la ville. Politiques foncières et marches immobiliers à Phnom Penh." *Espace et Sociétés* 143, (2010): 63-79.

6. Cohen, J. L. "Scholarship or Politics? Architectural History and the Risk of Autonomy." *Journal of the Society of American Historians* 67, (3) (2008): 325-329.

7. Day, C. *Consensus Design. Socially inclusive process.* Oxford, Amstedam, Boston, London, New York, Paris, San Diego, San Francisco, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo: Architectural Press, 2003.

8. Franks, B. "New Right/New Left. An Alternative Experiment in Freedom." In *Non – Plan. Essays on Freedom, Participation and Change in Modern Architecture and Urbanism,* edited by J. Hughes, S. Sadler, 32-43. Oxford: Architectural Press, 2000.

9. Garnier, J-P. "Scénographies pour un simulacre: l'espace public reénchanté." *Espace et Societes* 134 (2008): 67-81.

10. Heurtin, J. P. "The Circle of Discussion and the Semicircle of Criticism." In *Making things Public. Atmospheres of democracy*, edited by B. Latour, and P. Weibel, 754-769. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.

11. Hoskyns, T. "Designing the Agon. Questions on Architecture, Space, Democracy and «The Political»." In *Making things Public. Atmospheres of democracy*, edited by B. Latour, and P. Weibel, 798-803. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.

12. Latour, B., and Yaneva, A. "«Give me a gun and I will make all buildings move» An ant's view of architecture". In *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, Design, Research*, edited by R. Geiser, 80-89. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008.

13. Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture.* New York: Dover Publications, (1986) [1923].

14. Leach, N. *Anestetica. Arhitectura ca anestezic*. Bucharest: Paidea, 1999.

15. Till, J. "The Negotiation of Hope." In *Architecture and participation*, edited by P. Blundell Jones, D. Petrescu, J. Till. Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2005.

16. Larsen, L. B. *The Society Without Qualities*. 2013. [online] on http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-society-without-qualities-2/ [accessed 3.11.2013].

17. Latour, B. *Reassembling the social. An introduction to actor-network-theory.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

18. Mayer, J. "The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity." In *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, edited by E. Suderburg, 24-25. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

19. Mihali, C. *Despre architect, despre chemarile si datoriile lui.* 2011. [online] on http://ciprianmihali.blogspot.ro/2011/05/despre-arhitect-despre-chemarile-si.html [accesed 6.06.2011].

20. Mouffe, C. "Some Reflections on an Agonistic Approach to the Public." In *Making things Public. Atmospheres of democracy*, edited by Bruno Latour, and Peter Weibel, 804-807. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.

21. Mouffe, C. *The Democratic Paradox*. London, New York: Verso, 2000.

22. Müller, W. "Adherence." In *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture. City, Technology and Society in the Information Age*, edited by Gausa, M., Guallart, V., Muller, W., et al. Barcelona: ACTAR, 2003.

23. Negri, A., Petcou, C., Petrescu, D., Querrien, A. *What makes a biopolitical space?,* [online] in Eurozine, 2007. www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-01-21-negri-en.html [accesed 24.11.2011].

24. Paglen, T. "Experimental Geography. From Cultural Production to the Production of Space." In *Experimental Geography. Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography and Urbanism*, edited by N. Thompson, 30-33. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2008.

25. Petrescu, D. *How to make a community as well as the space for it*. 2007. [online] on http://www.peprav.net/tool/spip.php?article31 [accesed 24.11.2011].

26. Ranciere, J. *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*. London, New York: Continuum, 2010.

27. Richardson, T., & Connely, S. "Reinventing public participation: Planning in the Age of Consensus." In *Architecture and participation*, edited by P. Blundell Jones, D. Petrescu, J. Till, 77-104. Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2010.

28. Ruby, A. "pragmatopia." In *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture. City, Technology and Society in the Information Age*, edited by M. Gausa, V. Guallart, W. Muller, et al. Barcelona: ACTAR, 2003.

29. Secci, C. "Réceptions et appropriations des sciences humaines par les architectes. Les cas des CIAM et du Team Ten (1928-1962)." *Espace et Societes* 142, (2010): 17-31.

30. Sennet, R. "The Open City." In *The Endless City*, edited by R. Burdett, and D. Sudjic, 290-297. London: Phaidon, 2007.

31. Sennet, R. "Boundaries and Borders." In *Living in the Endless City,* edited by R. Burdett, and D. Sudjic, 324-331. London: Phaidon, 2011.

32. Sudjic, D. *The Edifice Complex. The Architecture of Power*. London: Penguin Books, 2011 [2005].

33. Querrien, A. "The exodus lives on the street corner." In *Urban Act*, edited by AAA and PEPRAV, 307-313. Montrouge: Moutot Imprimeurs, 2007.